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SUSY: A STORY OF THE PLAINS
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SUSY: A STORY OF THE PLAINS

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SUSY.

CHAPTER I.

Where the San Leandro turnpike stretches its dusty, hot, and interminable length along the valley, at a point where the heat and dust have become intolerable, the monotonous expanse of wild oats on either side illimitable, and the distant horizon apparently remoter than ever, it suddenly slips between a stunted thicket or hedge of "scrub oaks," which until that moment had been undistinguishable above the long, misty, quivering level of the grain. The thicket rising gradually in height, but with a regular slope whose gradient had been determined by centuries of western trade winds, presently becomes a fair wood of live-oak, and a few hundred yards further at last assumes the aspect of a primeval forest. A delicious coolness fills the air; the long, shadowy aisles greet the aching eye with a

soothing twilight; the murmur of unseen brooks is heard, and, by a strange irony, the enormous, widely-spaced stacks of wild oats are replaced by a carpet of tiny-leaved mosses and chickweed at the roots of trees, and the minutest clover in more open spaces. The baked and cracked adobe soil of the now vanished plains is exchanged for a heavy red mineral dust and gravel, rocks and boulders make their appearance, and at times the road is crossed by the white veins of quartz. It is still the San Leandro turnpike, — a few miles later to rise from this *cañada* into the upper plains again, — but it is also the actual gateway and avenue to the Robles Rancho. When the departing visitors of Judge Peyton, now owner of the rancho, reach the outer plains again, after twenty minutes' drive from the house, the *cañada*, rancho, and avenue have as completely disappeared from view as if they had been swallowed up in the plain.

A cross road from the turnpike is the usual approach to the *casa* or mansion, — a long, low quadrangle of brown adobe wall in a bare but gently sloping eminence. And here a second surprise meets the stranger. He seems to have emerged from the forest

upon another illimitable plain, but one utterly trackless, wild, and desolate. It is, however, only a lower terrace of the same valley, and, in fact, comprises the three square leagues of the Robles Rancho. Uncultivated and savage as it appears, given over to wild cattle and horses that sometimes sweep in frightened bands around the very *casa* itself, the long south wall of the corral embraces an orchard of gnarled pear-trees, an old vineyard, and a venerable garden of olives and oranges. A manor, formerly granted by Charles V. to Don Vincente Robles, of Andalusia, of pious and ascetic memory, it had commended itself to Judge Peyton, of Kentucky, a modern heretic pioneer of bookish tastes and secluded habits, who had bought it of Don Vincente's descendants. Here Judge Peyton seemed to have realized his idea of a perfect climate, and a retirement, half-studious, half-active, with something of the seigniorality of the old slaveholder that he had been. Here, too, he had seen the hope of restoring his wife's health — for which he had undertaken the overland emigration — more than fulfilled in Mrs. Peyton's improved physical condition, albeit at the expense,

perhaps, of some of the languorous graces of ailing American wifehood.

It was with a curious recognition of this latter fact that Judge Peyton watched his wife crossing the *patio* or courtyard with her arm around the neck of her adopted daughter "Suzette." A sudden memory crossed his mind of the first day that he had seen them together, — the day that he had brought the child and her boy-companion — two estrays from an emigrant train on the plains — to his wife in camp. Certainly Mrs. Peyton was stouter and stronger fibred; the wonderful Californian climate had materialized her figure, as it had their Eastern fruits and flowers, but it was stranger that "Susy" — the child of homelier frontier blood and parentage, whose wholesome peasant plumpness had at first attracted them — should have grown thinner and more graceful, and even seemed to have gained the delicacy his wife had lost. Six years had imperceptibly wrought this change; it had never struck him before so forcibly as on this day of Susy's return from the convent school at Santa Clara for the holidays.

The woman and child had reached the

broad veranda which, on one side of the *patio*, replaced the old Spanish corridor. It was the single modern innovation that Peyton had allowed himself when he had broken the quadrangular symmetry of the old house with a wooden "annexe" or addition beyond the walls. It made a pleasant lounging-place, shadowed from the hot midday sun by sloping roofs and awnings, and sheltered from the boisterous afternoon trade winds by the opposite side of the court. But Susy did not seem inclined to linger there long that morning, in spite of Mrs. Peyton's evident desire for a maternal tête-à-tête. The nervous preoccupation and capricious ennui of an indulged child showed in her pretty but discontented face, and knit her curved eyebrows, and Peyton saw a look of pain pass over his wife's face as the young girl suddenly and half-laughingly broke away and fluttered off towards the old garden.

Mrs. Peyton looked up and caught her husband's eye.

"I am afraid Susy finds it more dull here every time she returns," she said, with an apologetic smile. "I am glad she has invited one of her school friends to come for

a visit to-morrow. You know, yourself, John," she added, with a slight partisan attitude, "that the lonely old house and wild plain are not particularly lively for young people, however much they may suit *your* ways."

"It certainly must be dull if she can't stand it for three weeks in the year," said her husband dryly. "But we really cannot open the San Francisco house for her summer vacation, nor can we move from the rancho to a more fashionable locality. Besides, it will do her good to run wild here. I can remember when she was n't so fastidious. In fact, I was thinking just now how changed she was from the day when we picked her up" —

"How often am I to remind you, John," interrupted the lady, with some impatience, "that we agreed never to speak of her past, or even to think of her as anything but our own child. You know how it pains me! And the poor dear herself has forgotten it, and thinks of us only as her own parents. I really believe that if that wretched father and mother of hers had not been killed by the Indians, or were to come to life again, she would neither know them nor care for

them. I mean, of course, John," she said, averting her eyes from a slightly cynical smile on her husband's face, "that it 's only natural for young children to be forgetful, and ready to take new impressions."

"And as long, dear, as *we* are not the subjects of this youthful forgetfulness, and she is n't really finding *us* as stupid as the rancho," replied her husband cheerfully, "I suppose we must n't complain."

"John, how can you talk such nonsense?" said Mrs. Peyton impatiently. "But I have no fear of that," she added, with a slightly ostentatious confidence. "I only wish I was as sure" —

"Of what?"

"Of nothing happening that could take her from us. I do not mean death, John, — like our first little one. That does not happen to one twice; but I sometimes dread" —

"What? She 's only fifteen, and it 's rather early to think about the only other inevitable separation, — marriage. Come, Ally, this is mere fancy. She has been given up to us by her family, — at least, by all that we know are left of them. I have legally adopted her. If I have not made

her my heiress, it is because I prefer to leave everything to *you*, and I would rather she should know that she was dependent upon you for the future than upon me."

"And I can make a will in her favor if I want to?" said Mrs. Peyton quickly.

"Always," responded her husband smilingly; "but you have ample time to think of that, I trust. Meanwhile I have some news for you which may make Susy's visit to the rancho this time less dull to her. You remember Clarence Brant, the boy who was with her when we picked her up, and who really saved her life?"

"No, I don't," said Mrs. Peyton pettishly, "nor do I want to! You know, John, how distasteful and unpleasant it is for me to have those dreary, petty, and vulgar details of the poor child's past life recalled, and, thank Heaven, I have forgotten them except when you choose to drag them before me. You agreed, long ago, that we were never to talk of the Indian massacre of her parents, so that we could also ignore it before her; then why do you talk of her vulgar friends, who are just as unpleasant? Please let us drop the past."

"Willingly, my dear; but, unfortunately,

we cannot make others do it. And this is a case in point. It appears that this boy, whom we brought to Sacramento to deliver to a relative" —

"And who was a wicked little impostor, — you remember that yourself, John, for he said that he was the son of Colonel Brant, and that he was dead; and you know, and my brother Harry knew, that Colonel Brant was alive all the time, and that he was lying, and Colonel Brant was not his father," broke in Mrs. Peyton impatiently.

"As it seems you do remember that much," said Peyton dryly, "it is only just to him that I should tell you that it appears that he was not an impostor. His story was *true*. I have just learned that Colonel Brant *was* actually his father, but had concealed his lawless life here, as well as his identity, from the boy. He was really that vague relative to whom Clarence was confided, and under that disguise he afterwards protected the boy, had him carefully educated at the Jesuit College of San José, and, dying two years ago in that filibuster raid in Mexico, left him a considerable fortune."

"And what has he to do with Susy's holidays?" said Mrs. Peyton, with uneasy quickness. "John, you surely cannot expect her ever to meet this common creature again, with his vulgar ways. His wretched associates like that Jim Hooker, and, as you yourself admit, the blood of an assassin, duelist, and — Heaven knows what kind of a pirate his father was n't at the last — in his veins! You don't believe that a lad of this type, however much of his father's ill-gotten money he may have, can be fit company for your daughter? You never could have thought of inviting him here?"

"I 'm afraid that 's exactly what I have done, Ally," said the smiling but unmoved Peyton; "but I 'm still more afraid that your conception of his present condition is an unfair one, like your remembrance of his past. Father Sobriente, whom I met at San José yesterday, says he is very intelligent, and thoroughly educated, with charming manners and refined tastes. His father's money, which they say was an investment for him in Carson's Bank five years ago, is as good as any one's, and his father's blood won't hurt him in California or the Southwest. At least, he is received

everywhere, and Don Juan Robinson was his guardian. Indeed, as far as social status goes, it might be a serious question if the actual daughter of the late John Silsbee, of Pike County, and the adopted child of John Peyton was in the least his superior. As Father Sobriente evidently knew Clarence's former companionship with Susy and her parents, it would be hardly politic for us to ignore it or seem to be ashamed of it. So I intrusted Sobriente with an invitation to young Brant on the spot."

Mrs. Peyton's impatience, indignation, and opposition, which had successively given way before her husband's quiet, masterful good humor, here took the form of a neurotic fatalism. She shook her head with superstitious resignation.

"Did n't I tell you, John, that I always had a dread of something coming" —

"But if it comes in the shape of a shy young lad, I see nothing singularly portentous in it. They have not met since they were quite small; their tastes have changed; if they don't quarrel and fight they may be equally bored with each other. Yet until then, in one way or another, Clarence will occupy the young lady's vacant caprice, and

her school friend, Mary Rogers, will be here, you know, to divide his attentions, and," added Peyton, with mock solemnity, "preserve the interest of strict propriety. Shall I break it to her, — or will you?"

"No, — yes." hesitated Mrs. Peyton; "perhaps I had better."

"Very well, I leave his character in your hands; only don't prejudice her into a romantic fancy for him." And Judge Peyton lounged smilingly away.

Then two little tears forced themselves from Mrs. Peyton's eyes. Again she saw that prospect of uninterrupted companionship with Susy, upon which each successive year she had built so many maternal hopes and confidences, fade away before her. She dreaded the coming of Susy's school friend, who shared her daughter's present thoughts and intimacy, although she had herself invited her in a more desperate dread of the child's abstracted, discontented eyes; she dreaded the advent of the boy who had shared Susy's early life before she knew her; she dreaded the ordeal of breaking the news and perhaps seeing that pretty animation spring into her eyes, which she had begun to believe no solicitude or tenderness of

her own ever again awakened, — and yet she dreaded still more that her husband should see it too. For the love of this re-created woman, although not entirely materialized with her changed fibre, had nevertheless become a coarser selfishness fostered by her loneliness and limited experience. The maternal yearning left unsatisfied by the loss of her first-born had never been filled by Susy's thoughtless acceptance of it; she had been led astray by the child's easy transference of dependence and the forgetfulness of youth, and was only now dimly conscious of finding herself face to face with an alien nature.

She started to her feet and followed the direction that Susy had taken. For a moment she had to front the afternoon trade wind which chilled her as it swept the plain beyond the gateway, but was stopped by the adobe wall, above whose shelter the stunted treetops — through years of exposure — slanted as if trimmed by gigantic shears. At first, looking down the venerable alley of fantastic, knotted shapes, she saw no trace of Susy. But half way down the gleam of a white skirt against a thicket of dark olives showed her the young girl sitting on a bench

in a neglected arbor. In the midst of this formal and faded pageantry she looked charmingly fresh, youthful, and pretty; and yet the unfortunate woman thought that her attitude and expression at that moment suggested more than her fifteen years of girlhood. Her golden hair still hung unfettered over her straight, boy-like back and shoulders; her short skirt still showed her childish feet and ankles; yet there seemed to be some undefined maturity or a vague womanliness about her that stung Mrs. Peyton's heart. The child was growing away from her, too!

"Susy!"

The young girl raised her head quickly; her deep violet eyes seemed also to leap with a sudden suspicion, and with a half-mechanical, secretive movement, that might have been only a schoolgirl's instinct, her right hand had slipped a paper on which she was scribbling between the leaves of her book. Yet the next moment, even while looking interrogatively at her mother, she withdrew the paper quietly, tore it up into small pieces, and threw them on the ground.

But Mrs. Peyton was too preoccupied

with her news to notice the circumstance, and too nervous in her haste to be tactful. "Susy, your father has invited that boy, Clarence Brant, — you know that creature we picked up and assisted on the plains, when you were a mere baby, — to come down here and make us a visit."

Her heart seemed to stop beating as she gazed breathlessly at the girl. But Susy's face, unchanged except for the alert, questioning eyes, remained fixed for a moment; then a childish smile of wonder opened her small red mouth, expanded it slightly as she said simply: —

"Lor, mar! He has n't, really!"

Inexpressibly, yet unreasonably reassured, Mrs. Peyton hurriedly recounted her husband's story of Clarence's fortune, and was even joyfully surprised into some fairness of statement.

"But you don't remember him much, do you, dear? It was so long ago, and — you are quite a young lady now," she added eagerly.

The open mouth was still fixed; the wondering smile would have been idiotic in any face less dimpled, rosy, and piquant than Susy's. After a slight gasp, as if in still

incredulous and partly reminiscent preoccupation, she said without replying: —

"How funny! When is he coming?"

"Day after to-morrow," returned Mrs. Peyton, with a contented smile.

"And Mary Rogers will be here, too. It will be real fun for her."

Mrs. Peyton was more than reassured. Half ashamed of her jealous fears, she drew Susy's golden head towards her and kissed it. And the young girl, still reminiscent, with smilingly abstracted toleration, returned the caress.

CHAPTER II.

It was not thought inconsistent with Susy's capriciousness that she should declare her intention the next morning of driving her pony buggy to Santa Inez to anticipate the stage-coach and fetch Mary Rogers from the station. Mrs. Peyton, as usual, supported the young lady's whim and opposed her husband's objections.

"Because the stage-coach happens to pass our gate, John, it is no reason why Susy should n't drive her friend from Santa Inez if she prefers it. It 's only seven miles, and you can send Pedro to follow her on horseback to see that she comes to no harm."

"But that is n't Pedro's business," said Peyton.

"He ought to be proud of the privilege," returned the lady, with a toss of her head.

Peyton smiled grimly, but yielded; and when the stage-coach drew up the next afternoon at the Santa Inez Hotel, Susy was already waiting in her pony carriage before

it. Although the susceptible driver, expressman, and passengers generally, charmed with this golden-haired vision, would have gladly protracted the meeting of the two young friends, the transfer of Mary Rogers from the coach to the carriage was effected with considerable hauteur and youthful dignity by Susy. Even Mary Rogers, two years Susy's senior, a serious brunette, whose good-humor did not, however, impair her capacity for sentiment, was impressed and even embarrassed by her demeanor; but only for a moment. When they had driven from the hotel and were fairly hidden again in the dust of the outlying plain, with the discreet Pedro hovering in the distance, Susy dropped the reins, and, grasping her companion's arm, gasped, in tones of dramatic intensity: —

"He 's been heard from, and is coming *here!*"

"Who?"

A sickening sense that her old confidante had already lost touch with her — they had been separated for nearly two weeks — might have passed through Susy's mind.

"Who?" she repeated, with a vicious shake of Mary's arm, "why, Clarence Brant, of course."

"No!" said Mary, vaguely.

Nevertheless, Susy went on rapidly, as if to neutralize the effect of her comrade's vacuity.

"You never could have imagined it! Never! Even *I*, when mother told me, I thought I should have fainted, and *all* would have been revealed!"

"But," hesitated the still wondering confidante, "I thought that was all over long ago. You have n't seen him nor heard from him since that day you met accidentally at Santa Clara, two years ago, have you?"

Susy's eyes shot a blue ray of dark but unutterable significance into Mary's, and then were carefully averted. Mary Rogers, although perfectly satisfied that Susy had never seen Clarence since, nevertheless instantly accepted and was even thrilled with this artful suggestion of a clandestine correspondence. Such was the simple faith of youthful friendship.

"Mother knows nothing of it, of course, and a word from you or him would ruin everything," continued the breathless Susy. "That 's why I came to fetch you and warn you. You must see him first, and warn him at any cost. If I had n't run every

risk to come here to-day, Heaven knows what might have happened! What do you think of the ponies, dear? They 're my own, and the sweetest! This one 's Susy, that one Clarence, — but privately, you know. Before the world and in the stables he 's only Birdie."

"But I thought you wrote to me that you called them 'Paul and Virginie,'" said Mary doubtfully.

"I do, sometimes," said Susy calmly. "But one has to learn to suppress one's feelings, dear!" Then quickly, "I do so hate deceit, don't you? Tell me, don't you think deceit perfectly hateful?"

Without waiting for her friend's loyal assent, she continued rapidly: "And he 's just rolling in wealth! and educated, papa says, to the highest degree!"

"Then," began Mary, "if he 's coming with your mother's consent, and if you have n't quarreled, and it is not broken off, I should think you 'd be just delighted."

But another quick flash from Susy's eyes dispersed these beatific visions of the future. "Hush!" she said, with suppressed dramatic intensity. "You know not what you say! There 's an awful mystery hangs over him.

Mary Rogers," continued the young girl, approaching her small mouth to her confidante's ear in an appalling whisper. "His father was — a *pirate!* Yes — lived a pirate and was killed a pirate!"

The statement, however, seemed to be partly ineffective. Mary Rogers was startled but not alarmed, and even protested feebly. "But," she said, "if the father 's dead, what 's that to do with Clarence? He was always with your papa — so you told me, dear — or other people, and could n't catch anything from his own father. And I 'm sure, dearest, he always seemed nice and quiet."

"Yes, *seemed*," returned Susy darkly, "but that 's all you know! It was in *his blood*. You know it always is, — you read it in the books, — you could see it in his eye. There were times, my dear, when he was thwarted, — when the slightest attention from another person to me revealed it! I have kept it to myself, — but think, dearest, of the effects of jealousy on that passionate nature! Sometimes I tremble to look back upon it."

Nevertheless, she raised her hands and threw back her lovely golden mane from her

childish shoulders with an easy, untroubled gesture. It was singular that Mary Rogers, leaning back comfortably in the buggy, also accepted these heart-rending revelations with comfortably knitted brows and luxuriously contented concern. If she found it difficult to recognize in the picture just drawn by Susy the quiet, gentle, and sadly reserved youth she had known, she said nothing. After a silence, lazily watching the distant wheeling vacquero, she said: —

"And your father always sends an outrider like that with you? How nice! So picturesque — and like the old Spanish days."

"Hush!" said Susy, with another unutterable glance.

But this time Mary was in full sympathetic communion with her friend, and equal to any incoherent hiatus of revelation.

"No!" she said promptly, "you don't mean it!"

"Don't ask me. I dare n't say anything to papa, for he 'd be simply furious. But there are times when we 're alone, and Pedro wheels down so near with *such* a look in his black eyes, that I 'm all in a tremble. It 's dreadful! They say he 's a real Bri-

ones, — and he sometimes says something in Spanish, ending with 'señorita,' but I pretend I don't understand."

"And I suppose that if anything should happen to the ponies, he 'd just risk his life to save you."

"Yes, — and it would be so awful, — for I just hate him!"

"But if *I* was with you, dear, he could n't expect you to be as grateful as if you were alone. Susy!" she continued after a pause, "if you just stirred up the ponies a little so as to make 'em go fast, perhaps he might think they 'd got away from you, and come dashing down here. It would be so funny to see him, — would n't it?"

The two girls looked at each other; their eyes sparkled already with a fearful joy, — they drew a long breath of guilty anticipation. For a moment Susy even believed in her imaginary sketch of Pedro's devotion.

"Papa said I was n't to use the whip except in a case of necessity," she said, reaching for the slender silver-handled toy, and setting her pretty lips together with the added determination of disobedience. "G'long!" — and she laid the lash smartly on the shining backs of the animals.

They were wiry, slender brutes of Mojave Indian blood, only lately broken to harness, and still undisciplined in temper. The lash sent them rearing into the air, where, forgetting themselves in the slackened traces and loose reins, they came down with a succession of bounds that brought the light buggy leaping after them with its wheels scarcely touching the ground. That unlucky lash had knocked away the bonds of a few months' servitude and sent the half-broken brutes instinctively careering with arched backs and kicking heels into the field towards the nearest cover.

Mary Rogers cast a hurried glance over her shoulder. Alas, they had not calculated on the insidious levels of the terraced plain, and the faithful Pedro had suddenly disappeared; the intervention of six inches of rising wild oats had wiped him out of the prospect and their possible salvation as completely as if he had been miles away. Nevertheless, the girls were not frightened; perhaps they had not time. There was, however, the briefest interval for the most dominant of feminine emotions, and it was taken advantage of by Susy.

"It was all *your* fault, dear!" she gasped,

as the forewheels of the buggy, dropping into a gopher rut, suddenly tilted up the back of the vehicle and shot its fair occupants into the yielding palisades of dusty grain. The shock detached the whiffletree from the splinter-bar, snapped the light pole, and, turning the now thoroughly frightened animals again from their course, sent them, goaded by the clattering fragments, flying down the turnpike. Half a mile farther on they overtook the gleaming white canvas hood of a slowly moving wagon drawn by two oxen, and, swerving again, the nearer pony stepped upon a trailing trace and ingloriously ended their career by rolling himself and his companion in the dust at the very feet of the peacefully plodding team.

Equally harmless and inglorious was the catastrophe of Susy and her friend. The strong, elastic stalks of the tall grain broke their fall and enabled them to scramble to their feet, dusty, disheveled, but unhurt, and even unstunned by the shock. Their first instinctive cries over a damaged hat or ripped skirt were followed by the quick reaction of childish laughter. They were alone; the very defection of Pedro consoled

them, in its absence of any witness to their disaster; even their previous slight attitude to each other was forgotten. They groped their way, pushing and panting, to the road again, where, beholding the overset buggy with its wheels ludicrously in the air, they suddenly seized and shook each other, and in an outburst of hilarious ecstasy, fairly laughed until the tears came into their eyes.

Then there was a breathless silence.

"The stage will be coming by in a moment," composedly said Susy. "Fix me, dear."

Mary Rogers calmly walked around her friend, bestowing a practical shake there, a pluck here, completely retying one bow and restoring an engaging fullness to another, yet critically examining, with her head on one side, the fascinating result. Then Susy performed the same function for Mary with equal deliberation and deftness. Suddenly Mary started and looked up.

"It 's coming," she said quickly, "and they 've *seen us*."

The expression of the faces of the two girls instantly changed. A pained dignity and resignation, apparently born of the most harrowing experiences and controlled

only by perfect good breeding, was distinctly suggested in their features and attitude as they stood patiently by the wreck of their overturned buggy awaiting the oncoming coach. In sharp contrast was the evident excitement among the passengers. A few rose from their seats in their eagerness; as the stage pulled up in the road beside the buggy four or five of the younger men leaped to the ground.

"Are you hurt, miss?" they gasped sympathetically.

Susy did not immediately reply, but ominously knitted her pretty eyebrows as if repressing a spasm of pain. Then she said, "Not at all," coldly, with the suggestion of stoically concealing some lasting or perhaps fatal injury, and took the arm of Mary Rogers, who had, in the mean time, established a touching yet graceful limp.

Declining the proffered assistance of the passengers, they helped each other into the coach, and freezingly requesting the driver to stop at Mr. Peyton's gate, maintained a statuesque and impressive silence. At the gates they got down, followed by the sympathetic glances of the others.

To all appearance their escapade, albeit

fraught with dangerous possibilities, had happily ended. But in the economy of human affairs, as in nature, forces are not suddenly let loose without more or less sympathetic disturbance which is apt to linger after the impelling cause is harmlessly spent. The fright which the girls had unsuccessfully attempted to produce in the heart of their escort had passed him to become a panic elsewhere. Judge Peyton, riding near the gateway of his rancho, was suddenly confronted by the spectacle of one of his vacqueros driving on before him the two lassoed and dusty ponies, with a face that broke into violent gesticulating at his master's quick interrogation.

"Ah! Mother of God! It was an evil day! For the bronchos had run away, upset the buggy, and had only been stopped by a brave *Americano* of an ox-team, whose lasso was even now around their necks, to prove it, and who had been dragged a matter of a hundred *varas*, like a calf, at their heels. The señoritas, — ah! had he not already said they were safe, by the mercy of Jesus! — picked up by the coach, and would be here at this moment."

"But where was Pedro all the time?

What was he doing?" demanded Peyton, with a darkened face and gathering anger.

The vacquero looked at his master, and shrugged his shoulders significantly. At any other time Peyton would have remembered that Pedro, as the reputed scion of a decayed Spanish family, and claiming superiority, was not a favorite with his fellow-retainers. But the gesture, half of suggestion, half of depreciation, irritated Peyton still more.

"Well, where is this American who *did* something when there was n't a man among you all able to stop a child's runaway ponies?" he said sarcastically. "Let me see him."

The vacquero became still more deprecatory.

"Ah! He had driven on with his team towards San Antonio. He would not stop to be thanked. But that was the whole truth. He, Incarnacion, could swear to it as to the Creed. There was nothing more."

"Take those beasts around the back way to the corral," said Peyton, thoroughly enraged, "and not a word of this to any one at the *casa*, do you hear? Not a word to Mrs. Peyton or the servants, or, by Heaven, I' ll

clear the rancho of the whole lazy crew of you at once. Out of the way there, and be off!"

He spurred his horse past the frightened menial, and dashed down the narrow lane that led to the gate. But, as Incarnacion had truly said, "It was an evil day," for at the bottom of the lane, ambling slowly along as he lazily puffed a yellow cigarette, appeared the figure of the erring Pedro. Utterly unconscious of the accident, attributing the disappearance of his charges to the inequalities of the plain, and, in truth, little interested in what he firmly believed was his purely artificial function, he had even made a larger circuit to stop at a wayside *fonda* for refreshments.

Unfortunately, there is no more illogical sequence of human emotion than the exasperation produced by the bland manner of the unfortunate object who has excited it, although that very unconcern may be the convincing proof of innocence of intention. Judge Peyton, already influenced, was furious at the comfortable obliviousness of his careless henchman, and rode angrily towards him. Only a quick turn of Pedro's wrist kept the two men from coming into collision.

"Is this the way you attend to your duty?" demanded Peyton, in a thick, suppressed voice. "Where is the buggy? Where is my daughter?"

There was no mistaking Judge Peyton's manner, even if the reason of it was not so clear to Pedro's mind, and his hot Latin blood flew instinctively to his face. But for that, he might have shown some concern or asked an explanation. As it was, he at once retorted with the national shrug and the national half-scornful, half-lazy "*Quien sabe?*"

"Who knows?" repeated Peyton, hotly. "*I* do! She was thrown out of her buggy through your negligence and infernal laziness! The ponies ran away, and were stopped by a stranger who was n't afraid of risking his bones, while *you* were limping around somewhere like a slouching, cowardly coyote."

The vacquero struggled a moment between blank astonishment and inarticulate rage. At last he burst out: —

"I am no coyote! I was there! I saw no runaway!"

"Don't lie to me, sir!" roared Peyton. "I tell you the buggy was smashed, the girls

were thrown out and nearly killed" — He stopped suddenly. The sound of youthful laughter had come from the bottom of the lane, where Susy Peyton and Mary Rogers, just alighted from the coach, in the reaction of their previous constrained attitude, were flying hilariously into view. A slight embarrassment crossed Peyton's face; a still deeper flush of anger overspread Pedro's sullen cheek.

Then Pedro found tongue again, his native one, rapidly, violently, half incoherently. "Ah, yes! It had come to this. It seems he was not a vacquero, a companion of the padrone on lands that had been his own before the *Americanos* robbed him of it, but a servant, a lackey of *muchachas*, an attendant on children to amuse them, or — why not? — an appendage to his daughter's state! Ah, Jesus Maria! such a state! such a *muchacha!* A picked-up foundling — a swineherd's daughter — to be ennobled by his, Pedro's, attendance, and for whose vulgar, clownish tricks, — tricks of a swineherd's daughter, — he, Pedro, was to be brought to book and insulted as if she were of Hidalgo blood! Ah, Caramba! Don Juan Peyton would find he could no more

make a servant of him than he could make a lady of her!"

The two young girls were rapidly approaching. Judge Peyton spurred his horse beside the vacquero's, and, swinging the long thong of his bridle ominously in his clenched fingers, said, with a white face: —

"*Vamos!*"

Pedro's hand slid towards his sash. Peyton only looked at him with a rigid smile of scorn.

"Or I 'll lash you here before them both," he added in a lower voice.

The vacquero met Peyton's relentless eyes with a yellow flash of hate, drew his reins sharply, until his mustang, galled by the cruel bit, reared suddenly as if to strike at the immovable American, then, apparently with the same action, he swung it around on its hind legs, as on a pivot, and dashed towards the corral at a furious gallop.

CHAPTER III.

MEANTIME the heroic proprietor of the peaceful ox-team, whose valor Incarnacion had so infelicitously celebrated, was walking listlessly in the dust beside his wagon. At a first glance his slouching figure, taken in connection with his bucolic conveyance, did not immediately suggest a hero. As he emerged from the dusty cloud it could be seen that he was wearing a belt from which a large dragoon revolver and hunting knife were slung, and placed somewhat ostentatiously across the wagon seat was a rifle. Yet the other contents of the wagon were of a singularly inoffensive character, and even suggested articles of homely barter. Culinary utensils of all sizes, tubs, scullery brushes, and clocks, with several rolls of cheap carpeting and calico, might have been the wares of some traveling vender. Yet, as they were only visible through a flap of the drawn curtains of the canvas hood, they did not mitigate the general aggressive

effect of their owner's appearance. A red bandanna handkerchief knotted and thrown loosely over his shoulders, a slouched hat pulled darkly over a head of long tangled hair, which, however, shadowed a round, comfortable face, scantily and youthfully bearded, were part of these confusing inconsistencies.

The shadows of the team wagon were already lengthening grotesquely over the flat, cultivated fields, which for some time had taken the place of the plains of wild oats in the branch road into which they had turned. The gigantic shadow of the proprietor, occasionally projected before it, was in characteristic exaggeration, and was often obliterated by a puff of dust, stirred by the plodding hoofs of the peaceful oxen, and swept across the field by the strong afternoon trades. The sun sank lower, although a still potent presence above the horizon line; the creaking wagon lumbered still heavily along. Yet at intervals its belligerent proprietor would start up from his slouching, silent march, break out into violent, disproportionate, but utterly ineffective objurgation of his cattle, jump into the air and kick his heels together in some par-

oxysm of indignation against them, — an act, however, which was received always with heavy bovine indifference, the dogged scorn of swaying, repudiating heads, or the dull contempt of lazily flicking tails.

Towards sunset one or two straggling barns and cottages indicated their approach to the outskirts of a country town or settlement. Here the team halted, as if the belligerent-looking teamster had felt his appearance was inconsistent with an effeminate civilization, and the oxen were turned into an open waste opposite a nondescript wooden tenement, half farmhouse and half cabin, evidently of the rudest Western origin. He may have recognized the fact that these "shanties" were not, as the ordinary traveler might infer, the first rude shelter of the original pioneers or settlers, but the later makeshifts of some recent Western immigrants who, like himself, probably found themselves unequal to the settled habits of the village, and who still retained their nomadic instincts. It chanced, however, that the cabin at present was occupied by a New England mechanic and his family, who had emigrated by ship around Cape Horn, and who had no experience of the West,

the plains, or its people. It was therefore with some curiosity and a certain amount of fascinated awe that the mechanic's only daughter regarded from the open door of her dwelling the arrival of this wild and lawless-looking stranger.

Meantime he had opened the curtains of the wagon and taken from its interior a number of pots, pans, and culinary utensils, which he proceeded to hang upon certain hooks that were placed on the outer ribs of the board and the sides of the vehicle. To this he added a roll of rag carpet, the end of which hung from the tailboard, and a roll of pink calico temptingly displayed on the seat. The mystification and curiosity of the young girl grew more intense at these proceedings. It looked like the ordinary exhibition of a traveling peddler, but the gloomy and embattled appearance of the man himself scouted so peaceful and commonplace a suggestion. Under the pretense of chasing away a marauding hen, she sallied out upon the waste near the wagon. It then became evident that the traveler had seen her, and was not averse to her interest in his movements, although he had not changed his attitude of savage retrospection. An occasional

ejaculation of suppressed passion, as if the memory of some past conflict was too much for him, escaped him even in this peaceful occupation. As this possibly caused the young girl to still hover timidly in the distance, he suddenly entered the wagon and reappeared carrying a tin bucket, with which he somewhat ostentatiously crossed her path, his eyes darkly wandering as if seeking something.

"If you 're lookin' for the spring, it 's a spell furder on — by the willows."

It was a pleasant voice, the teamster thought, albeit with a dry, crisp, New England accent unfamiliar to his ears. He looked into the depths of an unlovely blue-check sunbonnet, and saw certain small, irregular features and a sallow cheek, lit up by a pair of perfectly innocent, trustful, and wondering brown eyes. Their timid possessor seemed to be a girl of seventeen, whose figure, although apparently clad in one of her mother's gowns, was still undeveloped and repressed by rustic hardship and innutrition. As her eyes met his she saw that the face of this gloomy stranger was still youthful, by no means implacable, and, even at that moment, was actually suf-

fused by a brick-colored blush! In matters of mere intuition, the sex, even in its most rustic phase, is still our superior; and this unsophisticated girl, as the trespasser stammered, "Thank ye, miss," was instinctively emboldened to greater freedom.

"Dad ain't tu hum, but ye kin have a drink o' milk if ye keer for it."

She motioned shyly towards the cabin, and then led the way. The stranger, with an inarticulate murmur, afterwards disguised as a cough, followed her meekly. Nevertheless, by the time they had reached the cabin he had shaken his long hair over his eyes again, and a dark abstraction gathered chiefly in his eyebrows. But it did not efface from the girl's mind the previous concession of a blush, and, although it added to her curiosity, did not alarm her. He drank the milk awkwardly. But by the laws of courtesy, even among the most savage tribes, she felt he was, at that moment at least, harmless. A timid smile fluttered around her mouth as she said: —

"When ye hung up them things I thought ye might be havin' suthing to swap or sell. That is," — with tactful politeness, — "mother was wantin' a new skillet, and it would

have been handy if you 'd had one. But" — with an apologetic glance at his equipments — "if it ain't your business, it 's all right, and no offense."

"I 've got a lot o' skillets," said the strange teamster, with marked condescension, "and she can have one. They 're all that 's left outer a heap o' trader's stuff captured by Injuns t' other side of Laramie. We had a big fight to get 'em back. Lost two of our best men, — scalped at Bloody Creek, — and had to drop a dozen redskins in their tracks, — me and another man, — lyin' flat in er wagon and firin' under the flaps o' the canvas. I don't know ez they waz wuth it," he added in gloomy retrospect; "but I 've got to get rid of 'em, I reckon, somehow, afore I work over to Deadman's Gulch again."

The young girl's eyes brightened timidly with a feminine mingling of imaginative awe and personal, pitying interest. He was, after all, so young and amiable looking for such hardships and adventures. And with all this, he — this Indian fighter — was a little afraid of *her!*

"Then that 's why you carry that knife and six-shooter?" she said. "But you

won't want 'em now, here in the settlement."

"That 's ez mebbe," said the stranger darkly. He paused, and then suddenly, as if recklessly accepting a dangerous risk, unbuckled his revolver and handed it abstractedly to the young girl. But the sheath of the bowie-knife was a fixture in his body-belt, and he was obliged to withdraw the glittering blade by itself, and to hand it to her in all its naked terrors. The young girl received the weapons with a smiling complacency. Upon such altars as these the skeptical reader will remember that Mars had once hung his "battered shield," his lance, and "uncontrolled crest."

Nevertheless, the warlike teamster was not without embarrassment. Muttering something about the necessity of "looking after his stock," he achieved a hesitating bow, backed awkwardly out of the door, and receiving from the conquering hands of the young girl his weapons again, was obliged to carry them somewhat ingloriously in his hands across the road, and put them on the wagon seat, where, in company with the culinary articles, they seemed to lose their distinctively aggressive character. Here,

although his cheek was still flushed from his peaceful encounter, his voice regained some of its hoarse severity as he drove the oxen from the muddy pool into which they had luxuriantly wandered, and brought their fodder from the wagon. Later, as the sun was setting, he lit a corn-cob pipe, and somewhat ostentatiously strolled down the road, with a furtive eye lingering upon the still open door of the farmhouse. Presently two angular figures appeared from it, the farmer and his wife, intent on barter.

These he received with his previous gloomy preoccupation, and a slight variation of the story he had told their daughter. It is possible that his suggestive indifference piqued and heightened the bargaining instincts of the woman, for she not only bought the skillet, but purchased a clock and a roll of carpeting. Still more, in some effusion of rustic courtesy, she extended an invitation to him to sup with them, which he declined and accepted in the same embarrassed breath, returning the proffered hospitality by confidentially showing them a couple of dried scalps, presumably of Indian origin. It was in the same moment of human weakness that he answered their po-

lite query as to "what they might call him," by intimating that his name was "Red Jim," — a title of achievement by which he was generally known, which for the present must suffice them. But during the repast that followed this was shortened to "Mister Jim," and even familiarly by the elders to plain "Jim." Only the young girl habitually used the formal prefix in return for the "Miss Phœbe" that he called her.

With three such sympathetic and unexperienced auditors the gloomy embarrassment of Red Jim was soon dissipated, although it could hardly be said that he was generally communicative. Dark tales of Indian warfare, of night attacks and wild stampedes, in which he had always taken a prominent part, flowed freely from his lips, but little else of his past history or present prospects. And even his narratives of adventure were more or less fragmentary and imperfect in detail.

"You woz saying," said the farmer, with slow, matter of fact, New England deliberation, "ez how you guessed you woz beguiled amongst the Injins by your Mexican partner, a pow'ful influential man, and yet you woz the only one escaped the gen'ral slar-

terin'. How came the Injins to kill *him*, — their friend?"

"They did n't," returned Jim, with ominously averted eyes.

"What became of him?" continued the farmer.

Red Jim shadowed his eyes with his hand, and cast a dark glance of scrutiny out of the doors and windows. The young girl perceived it with timid, fascinated concern, and said hurriedly: —

"Don't ask him, father! Don't you see he must n't tell?"

"Not when spies may be hangin' round, and doggin' me at every step," said Red Jim, as if reflecting, with another furtive glance towards the already fading prospect without. "They 've sworn to revenge him," he added moodily.

A momentary silence followed. The farmer coughed slightly, and looked dubiously at his wife. But the two women had already exchanged feminine glances of sympathy for this evident slayer of traitors, and were apparently inclined to stop any adverse criticism.

In the midst of which a shout was heard from the road. The farmer and his family

instinctively started. Red Jim alone remained unmoved, — a fact which did not lessen the admiration of his feminine audience. The host rose quickly, and went out. The figure of a horseman had halted in the road, but after a few moments' conversation with the farmer they both moved towards the house and disappeared. When the farmer returned, it was to say that "one of them 'Frisco dandies, who did n't keer about stoppin' at the hotel in the settlement," had halted to give his "critter" a feed and drink that he might continue his journey. He had asked him to come in while the horse was feeding, but the stranger had "guessed he 'd stretch his legs outside and smoke his cigar;" he might have thought the company "not fine enough for him," but he was "civil spoken enough, and had an all-fired smart hoss, and seemed to know how to run him." To the anxious inquiries of his wife and daughter he added that the stranger did n't seem like a spy or a Mexican; was "as young as *him*," pointing to the moody Red Jim, "and a darned sight more peaceful-like in style."

Perhaps owing to the criticism of the farmer, perhaps from some still lurking sus-

picion of being overheard by eavesdroppers, or possibly from a humane desire to relieve the strained apprehension of the women, Red Jim, as the farmer disappeared to rejoin the stranger, again dropped into a lighter and gentler vein of reminiscence. He told them how, when a mere boy, he had been lost from an emigrant train in company with a little girl some years his junior. How, when they found themselves alone on the desolate plain, with the vanished train beyond their reach, he endeavored to keep the child from a knowledge of the real danger of their position, and to soothe and comfort her. How he carried her on his back, until, exhausted, he sank in a heap of sage-brush. How he was surrounded by Indians, who, however, never suspected his hiding-place; and how he remained motionless and breathless with the sleeping child for three hours, until they departed. How, at the last moment, he had perceived a train in the distance, and had staggered with her thither, although shot at and wounded by the trainmen in the belief that he was an Indian. How it was afterwards discovered that the child was the long-lost daughter of a millionaire; how he had resolutely refused

any gratuity for saving her, and she was now a peerless young heiress, famous in California. Whether this lighter tone of narrative suited him better, or whether the active feminine sympathy of his auditors helped him along, certain it was that his story was more coherent and intelligible and his voice less hoarse and constrained than in his previous belligerent reminiscences; his expression changed, and even his features worked into something like gentler emotion. The bright eyes of Phœbe, fastened upon him, turned dim with a faint moisture, and her pale cheek took upon itself a little color. The mother, after interjecting "Du tell," and " I wanter know," remained open-mouthed, staring at her visitor. And in the silence that followed, a pleasant, but somewhat melancholy voice came from the open door.

"I beg your pardon, but I thought I could n't be mistaken. It *is* my old friend, Jim Hooker!"

Everybody started. Red Jim stumbled to his feet with an inarticulate and hysteric exclamation. Yet the apparition that now stood in the doorway was far from being terrifying or discomposing. It was evidently

the stranger, — a slender, elegantly-knit figure, whose upper lip was faintly shadowed by a soft, dark mustache indicating early manhood, and whose unstudied ease in his well-fitting garments bespoke the dweller of cities. Good-looking and well-dressed, without the consciousness of being either; self-possessed through easy circumstances, yet without self-assertion; courteous by nature and instinct as well as from an experience of granting favors, he might have been a welcome addition to even a more critical company. But Red Jim, hurriedly seizing his outstretched hand, instantly dragged him away from the doorway into the road and out of hearing of his audience.

"Did you hear what I was saying?" he asked hoarsely.

"Well, yes, — I think so," returned the stranger, with a quiet smile.

"Ye ain't goin' back on me, Clarence, are ye, — ain't goin' to gimme away afore them, old pard, are ye?" said Jim, with a sudden change to almost pathetic pleading.

"No," returned the stranger, smiling. "And certainly not before that interested young lady, Jim. But stop. Let me look at you."

He held out both hands, took Jim's, spread them apart for a moment with a boyish gesture, and, looking in his face, said half mischievously, half sadly, "Yes, it 's the same old Jim Hooker, — unchanged."

"But *you 're* changed, — reg'lar war paint, Big Injin style!" said Hooker, looking up at him with an awkward mingling of admiration and envy. "Heard you struck it rich with the old man, and was Mister Brant now!"

"Yes," said Clarence gently, yet with a smile that had not only a tinge of weariness but even of sadness in it.

Unfortunately, the act, which was quite natural to Clarence's sensitiveness, and indeed partly sprang from some concern in his old companion's fortunes, translated itself by a very human process to Hooker's consciousness as a piece of rank affectation. *He* would have been exalted and exultant in Clarence's place, consequently any other exhibition was only "airs." Nevertheless, at the present moment Clarence was to be placated.

"You did n't mind my telling that story about your savin' Susy as my own, did ye?" he said, with a hasty glance over his shoul-

der. "I only did it to fool the old man and women-folks, and make talk. You won't blow on me? Ye ain't mad about it?"

It had crossed Clarence's memory that when they were both younger Jim Hooker had once not only borrowed his story, but his name and personality as well. Yet in his loyalty to old memories there was mingled no resentment for past injury. "Of course not," he said, with a smile that was, however, still thoughtful. "Why should I? Only I ought to tell you that Susy Peyton is living with her adopted parents not ten miles from here, and it might reach their ears. She 's quite a young lady now, and if *I* would n't tell her story to strangers, I don't think *you* ought to, Jim."

He said this so pleasantly that even the skeptical Jim forgot what he believed were the "airs and graces" of self-abnegation, and said, "Let 's go inside, and I 'll introduce you," and turned to the house. But Clarence Brant drew back. "I 'm going on as soon as my horse is fed, for I 'm on a visit to Peyton, and I intend to push as far as Santa Inez still to-night. I want to talk with you about yourself, Jim," he added gently; "your prospects and your future.

I heard," he went on hesitatingly, "that you were — at work — in a restaurant in San Francisco. I 'm glad to see that you are at least your own master here," — he glanced at the wagon. "You are selling things, I suppose? For yourself, or another? Is that team yours? Come," he added, still pleasantly, but in an older and graver voice, with perhaps the least touch of experienced authority, "be frank, Jim. Which is it? Never mind what things you 've told *in there*, tell *me* the truth about yourself. Can I help you in any way? Believe me, I should like to. We have been old friends, whatever difference in our luck, I am yours still."

Thus adjured, the redoubtable Jim, in a hoarse whisper, with a furtive eye on the house, admitted that he was traveling for an itinerant peddler, whom he expected to join later in the settlement; that he had his own methods of disposing of his wares, and (darkly) that his proprietor and the world generally had better not interfere with him; that (with a return to more confidential lightness) he had already "worked the Wild West Injin" business so successfully as to dispose of his wares, particularly in yonder

house, and might do even more if not prematurely and wantonly "blown upon," "gone back on," or "given away."

"But would n't you like to settle down on some bit of land like this, and improve it for yourself?" said Clarence. "All these valley terraces are bound to rise in value, and meantime you would be independent. It could be managed, Jim. I think *I* could arrange it for you," he went on, with a slight glow of youthful enthusiasm. "Write to me at Peyton's ranch, and I 'll see you when I come back, and we 'll hunt up something for you together." As Jim received the proposition with a kind of gloomy embarrassment, he added lightly, with a glance at the farmhouse, "It might be near *here*, you know; and you 'd have pleasant neighbors, and even eager listeners to your old adventures."

"You 'd better come in a minit before you go," said Jim, clumsily evading a direct reply. Clarence hesitated a moment, and then yielded. For an equal moment Jim Hooker was torn between secret jealousy of his old comrade's graces and a desire to present them as familiar associations of his own. But his vanity was quickly appeased.

Need it be said that the two women received this fleck and foam of a super-civilization they knew little of as almost an impertinence compared to the rugged, gloomy, pathetic, and equally youthful hero of an adventurous wilderness of which they knew still less? What availed the courtesy and gentle melancholy of Clarence Brant beside the mysterious gloom and dark savagery of Red Jim? Yet they received him patronizingly, as one who was, like themselves, an admirer of manly grace and power, and the recipient of Jim's friendship. The farmer alone seemed to prefer Clarence, and yet the latter's tacit indorsement of Red Jim, through his evident previous intimacy with him, impressed the man in Jim's favor. All of which Clarence saw with that sensitive perception which had given him an early insight into human weakness, yet still had never shaken his youthful optimism. He smiled a little thoughtfully, but was openly fraternal to Jim, courteous to his host and family, and, as he rode away in the faint moonlight, magnificently opulent in his largess to the farmer, — his first and only assertion of his position.

The farmhouse, straggling barn, and

fringe of dusty willows, the white dome of the motionless wagon, with the hanging frying pans and kettles showing in the moonlight like black silhouettes against the staring canvas, all presently sank behind Clarence like the details of a dream, and he was alone with the moon, the hazy mystery of the level, grassy plain, and the monotony of the unending road. As he rode slowly along he thought of that other dreary plain, white with alkali patches and brown with rings of deserted camp-fires, known to his boyhood of deprivation, dependency, danger, and adventure, oddly enough, with a strange delight; and his later years of study, monastic seclusion, and final ease and independence, with an easy sense of wasted existence and useless waiting. He remembered his homeless childhood in the South, where servants and slaves took the place of the father he had never known, and the mother that he rarely saw; he remembered his abandonment to a mysterious female relation, where his natural guardians seemed to have overlooked and forgotten him, until he was sent, an all too young adventurer, to work his passage on an overland emigrant train across the plains; he remembered, as

yesterday, the fears, the hopes, the dreams and dangers of that momentous journey. He recalled his little playmate, Susy, and their strange adventures — the whole incident that the imaginative Jim Hooker had translated and rehearsed as his own — rose vividly before him. He thought of the cruel end of that pilgrimage, which again left him homeless and forgotten by even the relative he was seeking in a strange land. He remembered his solitary journey to the gold mines, taken with a boy's trust and a boy's fearlessness, and the strange protector he had found there, who had news of his missing kinsman; he remembered how this protector — whom he had at once instinctively loved — transferred him to the house of this new-found relation, who treated him kindly and sent him to the Jesuit school, but who never awakened in him a feeling of kinship. He dreamed again of his life at school, his accidental meeting with Susy at Santa Clara, the keen revival of his boyish love for his old playmate, now a pretty schoolgirl, the petted adopted child of wealthy parents. He recalled the terrible shock that interrupted this boyish episode: the news of the death of his protector, and the revelation

that this hard, silent, and mysterious man was his own father, whose reckless life and desperate reputation had impelled him to assume a disguise.

He remembered how his sudden accession to wealth and independence had half frightened him, and had always left a lurking sensitiveness that he was unfairly favored, by some mere accident, above his less lucky companions. The rude vices of his old associates had made him impatient of the feebler sensual indulgences of the later companions of his luxury, and exposed their hollow fascinations; his sensitive fastidiousness kept him clean among vulgar temptations; his clear perceptions were never blinded by selfish sophistry. Meantime his feeling for Susy remained unchanged. Pride had kept him from seeking the Peytons. His present visit was as unpremeditated as Peyton's invitation had been unlooked for by him. Yet he had not allowed himself to be deceived. He knew that this courtesy was probably due to the change in his fortune, although he had hoped it might have been some change in their opinion brought about by Susy. But he would at least see her again, not in the pretty, half-clandestine

way she had thought necessary, but openly and as her equal.

In his rapid ride he seemed to have suddenly penetrated the peaceful calm of the night. The restless irritation of the afternoon trade winds had subsided; the tender moonlight had hushed and tranquilly possessed the worried plain; the unending files of wild oats, far spaced and distinct, stood erect and motionless as trees; something of the sedate solemnity of a great forest seemed to have fallen upon their giant stalks. There was no dew. In that light, dry air, the heavier dust no longer rose beneath the heels of his horse, whose flying shadow passed over the field like a cloud, leaving no trail or track behind it. In the preoccupation of his thought and his breathless retrospect, the young man had ridden faster than he intended, and he now checked his panting horse. The influence of the night and the hushed landscape stole over him; his thoughts took a gentler turn; in that dim, mysterious horizon line before him, his future seemed to be dreamily peopled with airy, graceful shapes that more or less took the likeness of Susy. She was bright, coquettish, romantic, as he had last seen her;

she was older, graver, and thoughtfully welcome of him; or she was cold, distant, and severely forgetful of the past. How would her adopted father and mother receive him? Would they ever look upon him in the light of a suitor to the young girl? He had no fear of Peyton, — he understood his own sex, and, young as he was, knew already how to make himself respected; but how could he overcome that instinctive aversion which Mrs. Peyton had so often made him feel he had provoked? Yet in this dreamy hush of earth and sky, what was not possible? His boyish heart beat high with daring visions.

He saw Mrs. Peyton in the porch, welcoming him with that maternal smile which his childish longing had so often craved to share with Susy. Peyton would be there, too, — Peyton, who had once pushed back his torn straw hat to look approvingly in his boyish eyes; and Peyton, perhaps, might be proud of him.

Suddenly he started. A voice in his very ear!

"Bah! A yoke of vulgar cattle grazing on lands that were thine by right and law. Neither more nor less than that. And I

tell thee, Pancho, like cattle, to be driven off or caught and branded for one's own. Ha! There are those who could swear to the truth of this on the Creed. Ay! and bring papers stamped and signed by the governor's rubric to prove it. And not that I hate them, — bah! what are those heretic swine to me? But thou dost comprehend me? It galls and pricks me to see them swelling themselves with stolen husks, and men like thee, Pancho, ousted from their own land."

Clarence had halted in utter bewilderment. No one was visible before him, behind him, on either side. The words, in Spanish, came from the air, the sky, the distant horizon, he knew not which. Was he still dreaming? A strange shiver crept over his skin as if the air had grown suddenly chill. Then another mysterious voice arose, incredulous, half mocking, but equally distinct and clear.

"Caramba! What is this? You are wandering, friend Pancho. You are still smarting from his tongue. He has the grant confirmed by his brigand government; he has the *possession*, stolen by a thief like himself; and he has the Corregidors with

him. For is he not one of them himself, this Judge Peyton?"

Peyton! Clarence felt the blood rush back to his face in astonishment and indignation. His heels mechanically pressed his horse's flanks, and the animal sprang forward.

"*Guarda! Mira!*" said the voice again in a quicker, lower tone. But this time it was evidently in the field beside him, and the heads and shoulders of two horsemen emerged at the same moment from the tall ranks of wild oats. The mystery was solved. The strangers had been making their way along a lower level of the terraced plain, hidden by the grain, not twenty yards away, and parallel with the road they were now ascending to join. Their figures were alike formless in long striped *serapes*, and their features undistinguishable under stiff black sombreros.

"*Buenas noches*, señor," said the second voice, in formal and cautious deliberation.

A sudden inspiration made Clarence respond in English, as if he had not comprehended the stranger's words, "Eh?"

"Gooda-nighta," repeated the stranger.

"Oh, good-night," returned Clarence.

They passed him. Their spurs tinkled twice or thrice, their mustangs sprang forward, and the next moment the loose folds of their *serapes* were fluttering at their sides like wings in their flight.

CHAPTER IV.

After the chill of a dewless night the morning sun was apt to look ardently upon the Robles Rancho, if so strong an expression could describe the dry, oven-like heat of a Californian coast-range valley. Before ten o'clock the adobe wall of the *patio* was warm enough to permit lingering vacqueros and idle *peons* to lean against it, and the exposed *annexe* was filled with sharp, resinous odors from the oozing sap of unseasoned "redwood" boards, warped and drying in the hot sunshine. Even at that early hour the climbing Castilian roses were drooping against the wooden columns of the new veranda, scarcely older than themselves, and mingling an already faded spice with the aroma of baking wood and the more material fragrance of steaming coffee, that seemed dominant everywhere.

In fact, the pretty breakfast-room, whose three broad windows, always open to the veranda, gave an *al fresco* effect to every

meal, was a pathetic endeavor of the Southern-bred Peyton to emulate the soft, luxurious, and open-air indolence of his native South, in a climate that was not only *not* tropical, but even austere in its most fervid moments. Yet, although cold draughts invaded it from the rear that morning, Judge Peyton sat alone, between the open doors and windows, awaiting the slow coming of his wife and the young ladies. He was not in an entirely comfortable mood that morning. Things were not going on well at Robles. That truculent vagabond, Pedro, had, the night before, taken himself off with a curse that had frightened even the vacqueros, who most hated him as a companion, but who now seemed inclined to regard his absence as an injury done to their race. Peyton, uneasily conscious that his own anger had been excited by an exaggerated conception of the accident, was now, like most obstinate men, inclined to exaggerate the importance of Pedro's insolence. He was well out of it to get rid of this quarrelsome hanger-on, whose presumption and ill humor threatened the discipline of the rancho, yet he could not entirely forget that he had employed him on account of his fam-

ily claims, and from a desire to placate racial jealousy and settle local differences. For the inferior Mexicans and Indian half-breeds still regarded their old masters with affection; were, in fact, more concerned for the integrity of their caste than the masters were themselves, and the old Spanish families who had made alliances with Americans, and shared their land with them, had rarely succeeded in alienating their retainers with their lands. Certain experiences in the proving of his grant before the Land Commission had taught Peyton that they were not to be depended upon. And lately there had been unpleasant rumors of the discovery of some unlooked-for claimants to a division of the grant itself, which might affect his own title.

He looked up quickly as voices and light steps on the veranda at last heralded the approach of his tardy household from the corridor. But, in spite of his preoccupation, he was startled and even awkwardly impressed with a change in Susy's appearance. She was wearing, for the first time, a long skirt, and this sudden maturing of her figure struck him, as a man, much more forcibly than it would probably have im-

pressed a woman, more familiar with details. He had not noticed certain indications of womanhood, as significant, perhaps, in her carriage as her outlines, which had been lately perfectly apparent to her mother and Mary, but which were to him now, for the first time, indicated by a few inches of skirt. She not only looked taller to his masculine eyes, but these few inches had added to the mystery as well as the drapery of the goddess; they were not so much the revelation of maturity as the suggestion that it was *hidden*. So impressed was he, that a half-serious lecture on her yesterday's childishness, the outcome of his irritated reflections that morning, died upon his lips. He felt he was no longer dealing with a child.

He welcomed them with that smile of bantering approbation, supposed to keep down inordinate vanity, which for some occult reason one always reserves for the members of one's own family. He was quite conscious that Susy was looking very pretty in this new and mature frock, and that as she stood beside his wife, far from ageing Mrs. Peyton's good looks and figure, she appeared like an equal companion, and that they mutually "became" one another.

This, and the fact that they were all, including Mary Rogers, in their freshest, gayest morning dresses, awakened a half-humorous, half-real apprehension in his mind, that he was now hopelessly surrounded by a matured sex, and in a weak minority.

"I think I ought to have been prepared," he began grimly, "for this addition to — to — the skirts of my family."

"Why, John," returned Mrs. Peyton quickly; "do you mean to say you have n't noticed that the poor child has for weeks been looking positively indecent?"

"Really, papa, I 've been a sight to behold. Have n't I, Mary?" chimed in Susy.

"Yes, dear. Why, Judge, I 've been wondering that Susy stood it so well, and never complained."

Peyton glanced around him at this compact feminine embattlement. It was as he feared. Yet even here he was again at fault.

"And," said Mrs. Peyton slowly, with the reserved significance of the feminine postscript in her voice, "if that Mr. Brant is coming here to-day, it would be just as well for him to see *that she is no longer a child, as when he knew her.*"

An hour later, good-natured Mary Rogers, in her character of "a dear," — which was usually indicated by the undertaking of small errands for her friend, — was gathering roses from the old garden for Susy's adornment, when she saw a vision which lingered with her for many a day. She had stopped to look through the iron *grille* in the adobe wall, across the open wind-swept plain. Miniature waves were passing over the wild oats, with glittering disturbances here and there in the depressions like the sparkling of green foam; the horizon line was sharply defined against the hard, steel-blue sky; everywhere the brand-new morning was shining with almost painted brilliancy; the vigor, spirit, and even crudeness of youth were over all. The young girl was dazzled and bewildered. Suddenly, as if blown out of the waving grain, or an incarnation of the vivid morning, the bright and striking figure of a youthful horseman flashed before the *grille*. It was Clarence Brant! Mary Rogers had always seen him, in the loyalty of friendship, with Susy's prepossessed eyes, yet she fancied that morning that he had never looked so handsome before. Even the foppish fripperies

of his riding-dress and silver trappings seemed as much the natural expression of conquering youth as the invincible morning sunshine. Perhaps it might have been a reaction against Susy's caprice or some latent susceptibility of her own; but a momentary antagonism to her friend stirred even her kindly nature. What right had Susy to trifle with such an opportunity? Who was *she* to hesitate over this gallant prince?

But Prince Charming's quick eyes had detected her, and the next moment his beautiful horse was beside the grating, and his ready hand of greeting extended through the bars.

"I suppose I am early and unexpected, but I slept at Santa Inez last night, that I might ride over in the cool of the morning. My things are coming by the stage-coach, later. It seemed such a slow way of coming one's self."

Mary Rogers's black eyes intimated that the way he had taken was the right one, but she gallantly recovered herself and remembered her position as confidante. And here was the opportunity of delivering Susy's warning unobserved. She withdrew her hand from Clarence's frank grasp, and pass-

ing it through the grating, patted the sleek, shining flanks of his horse, with a discreet division of admiration.

"And such a lovely creature, too! And Susy will be so delighted! and oh, Mr. Brant, please, you 're to say nothing of having met her at Santa Clara. It 's just as well not to begin with *that* here, for, you see" (with a large, maternal manner), "you were both *so* young then."

Clarence drew a quick breath. It was the first check to his vision of independence and equal footing! Then his invitation was *not* the outcome of a continuous friendship revived by Susy, as he had hoped; the Peytons had known nothing of his meeting with her, or perhaps they would not have invited him. He was here as an impostor, — and all because Susy had chosen to make a mystery of a harmless encounter, which might have been explained, and which they might have even countenanced. He thought bitterly of his old playmate for a brief moment, — as brief as Mary's antagonism. The young girl noticed the change in his face, but misinterpreted it.

"Oh, there 's no danger of its coming out if you don't say anything," she said,

quickly. "Ride on to the house, and don't wait for me. You 'll find them in the *patio* on the veranda."

Clarence moved on, but not as spiritedly as before. Nevertheless there was still dash enough about him and the animal he bestrode to stir into admiration the few lounging vacqueros of a country which was apt to judge the status of a rider by the quality of his horse. Nor was the favorable impression confined to them alone. Peyton's gratification rang out cheerily in his greeting: —

"Bravo, Clarence! You are here in true *caballero* style. Thanks for the compliment to the rancho."

For a moment the young man was transported back again to his boyhood, and once more felt Peyton's approving hand pushing back the worn straw hat from his childish forehead. A faint color rose to his cheeks; his eyes momentarily dropped. The highest art could have done no more! The slight aggressiveness of his youthful finery and picturesque good looks was condoned at once; his modesty conquered where self-assertion might have provoked opposition, and even Mrs. Peyton felt her-

self impelled to come forward with an outstretched hand scarcely less frank than her husband's. Then Clarence lifted his eyes. He saw before him the woman to whom his childish heart had gone out with the inscrutable longing and adoration of a motherless, homeless, companionless boy; the woman who had absorbed the love of his playmate without sharing it with him; who had showered her protecting and maternal caresses on Susy, a waif like himself, yet had not only left his heart lonely and desolate, but had even added to his childish distrust of himself the thought that he had excited her aversion. He saw her more beautiful than ever in her restored health, freshness of coloring, and mature roundness of outline. He was unconsciously touched with a man's admiration for her without losing his boyish yearnings and half-filial affection; in her new materialistic womanhood his youthful imagination had lifted her to a queen and goddess. There was all this appeal in his still boyish eyes, — eyes that had never yet known shame or fear in the expression of their emotions; there was all this in the gesture with which he lifted Mrs. Peyton's fingers to his lips. The little

group saw in this act only a Spanish courtesy in keeping with his accepted rôle. But a thrill of surprise, of embarrassment, of intense gratification passed over her. For he had not even looked at Susy!

Her relenting was graceful. She welcomed him with a winning smile. Then she motioned pleasantly towards Susy.

"But here is an older friend, Mr. Brant, whom you do not seem to recognize, — Susy, whom you have not seen since she was a child."

A quick flush rose to Clarence's cheek. The group smiled at this evident youthful confession of some boyish admiration. But Clarence knew that his truthful blood was merely resenting the deceit his lips were sealed from divulging. He did not dare to glance at Susy; it added to the general amusement that the young girl was obliged to present herself. But in this interval she had exchanged glances with Mary Rogers, who had rejoined the group, and she knew she was safe. She smiled with gracious condescension at Clarence; observed, with the patronizing superiority of age and established position, that he had *grown*, but had not greatly changed, and, it is needless to

say, again filled her mother's heart with joy. Clarence, still intoxicated with Mrs. Peyton's kindliness, and, perhaps, still embarrassed by remorse, had not time to remark the girl's studied attitude. He shook hands with her cordially, and then, in the quick reaction of youth, accepted with humorous gravity the elaborate introduction to Mary Rogers by Susy, which completed this little comedy. And if, with a woman's quickness, Mrs. Peyton detected a certain lingering glance which passed between Mary Rogers and Clarence, and misinterpreted it, it was only a part of that mystification into which these youthful actors are apt to throw their mature audiences.

"Confess, Ally," said Peyton, cheerfully, as the three young people suddenly found their tongues with aimless vivacity and inconsequent laughter, and started with unintelligible spirits for an exploration of the garden, "confess now that your *bête noir* is really a very manly as well as a very presentable young fellow. By Jove! the *padres* have made a Spanish swell out of him without spoiling the Brant grit, either! Come, now; you 're not afraid that Susy's style will suffer from *his* companionship. 'Pon

my soul, she might borrow a little of his courtesy to his elders without indelicacy. I only wish she had as sincere a way of showing her respect for you as he has. Did you notice that he really did n't seem to see anybody else but you at first? And yet you never were a friend to him, like Susy."

The lady tossed her head slightly, but smiled.

"This is the first time he 's seen Mary Rogers, is n't it?" she said meditatively.

"I reckon. But what 's that to do with his politeness to you?"

"And do her parents know him?" she continued, without replying.

"How do I know? I suppose everybody has heard of him. Why?"

"Because I think they 've taken a fancy to each other."

"What in the name of folly, Ally" — began the despairing Peyton.

"When you invite a handsome, rich, and fascinating young man into the company of young ladies, John," returned Mrs. Peyton, in her severest manner, "you must not forget you owe a certain responsibility to the parents. I shall certainly look after Miss Rogers."

CHAPTER V.

ALTHOUGH the three young people had left the veranda together, when they reached the old garden Clarence and Susy found themselves considerably in advance of Mary Rogers, who had become suddenly and deeply interested in the beauty of a passion vine near the gate. At the first discovery of their isolation their voluble exchange of information about themselves and their occupations since their last meeting stopped simultaneously. Clarence, who had forgotten his momentary irritation, and had recovered his old happiness in her presence, was nevertheless conscious of some other change in her than that suggested by the lengthened skirt and the later and more delicate accentuation of her prettiness. It was not her affectation of superiority and older social experience, for that was only the outcome of what he had found charming in her as a child, and which he still good-humoredly accepted; nor was it her charac-

teristic exaggeration of speech, which he still pleasantly recognized. It was something else, vague and indefinite, — something that had been unnoticed while Mary was with them, but had now come between them like some unknown presence which had taken the confidante's place. He remained silent, looking at her half-brightening cheek and conscious profile. Then he spoke with awkward directness.

"You are changed, Susy, more than in looks."

"Hush," said the girl in a tragic whisper, with a warning gesture towards the blandly unconscious Mary.

"But," returned Clarence wonderingly, "she 's your — our friend, you know."

"I *don't* know," said Susy, in a still deeper tone, "that is — oh, don't ask me! But when you 're always surrounded by spies, when you can't say your soul is your own, you doubt everybody!" There was such a pretty distress in her violet eyes and curving eyebrows, that Clarence, albeit vague as to its origin and particulars, nevertheless possessed himself of the little hand that was gesticulating dangerously near his own, and pressed it sympathetically. Per-

haps preoccupied with her emotions, she did not immediately withdraw it, as she went on rapidly: "And if you were cooped up here, day after day, behind these bars," pointing to the *grille*, "you 'd know what I suffer."

"But" — began Clarence.

"Hush!" said Susy, with a stamp of her little foot.

Clarence, who had only wished to point out that the whole lower end of the garden wall was in ruins and the *grille* really was no prevention, "hushed."

"And listen! Don't pay me much attention to-day, but talk to *her*," indicating the still discreet and distant Mary, "before father and mother. Not a word to her of this confidence, Clarence. To-morrow ride out alone on your beautiful horse, and come back by way of the woods, beyond our turning, at four o'clock. There 's a trail to the right of the big *madroño* tree. Take that. Be careful and keep a good lookout, for she must n't see you."

"Who must n't see me?" said the puzzled Clarence.

"Why, Mary, of course, you silly boy!" returned the girl impatiently. "She 'll be

looking for *me*. Go now, Clarence! Stop! Look at that lovely big maiden's-blush up there," pointing to a pink-suffused specimen of rose *grandiflora* hanging on the wall. "Get it, Clarence, — that one, — I 'll show you where, — there!" They had already plunged into the leafy bramble, and, standing on tiptoe, with her hand on his shoulder and head upturned, Susy's cheek had innocently approached Clarence's own. At this moment Clarence, possibly through some confusion of color, fragrance, or softness of contact, seemed to have availed himself of the opportunity, in a way which caused Susy to instantly rejoin Mary Rogers with affected dignity, leaving him to follow a few moments later with the captured flower.

Without trying to understand the reason of to-morrow's rendezvous, and perhaps not altogether convinced of the reality of Susy's troubles, he, however, did not find that difficulty in carrying out her other commands which he had expected. Mrs. Peyton was still gracious, and, with feminine tact, induced him to talk of himself, until she was presently in possession of his whole history, barring the episode of his meeting with Susy, since he had parted with them. He felt a

strange satisfaction in familiarly pouring out his confidences to this superior woman, whom he had always held in awe. There was a new delight in her womanly interest in his trials and adventures, and a subtle pleasure even in her half-motherly criticism and admonition of some passages. I am afraid he forgot Susy, who listened with the complacency of an exhibitor; Mary, whose black eyes dilated alternately with sympathy for the performer and deprecation of Mrs. Peyton's critical glances; and Peyton, who, however, seemed lost in thought, and preoccupied. Clarence was happy. The softly shaded lights in the broad, spacious, comfortably furnished drawing-room shone on the group before him. It was a picture of refined domesticity which the homeless Clarence had never known except as a vague, half-painful, boyish remembrance; it was a realization of welcome that far exceeded his wildest boyish vision of the preceding night. With that recollection came another, — a more uneasy one. He remembered how that vision had been interrupted by the strange voices in the road, and their vague but ominous import to his host. A feeling of self-reproach came over him. The threats

had impressed him as only mere braggadocio, — he knew the characteristic exaggeration of the race, — but perhaps he ought to privately tell Peyton of the incident at once.

The opportunity came later, when the ladies had retired, and Peyton, wrapped in a *poncho* in a rocking-chair, on the now chilly veranda, looked up from his reverie and a cigar. Clarence casually introduced the incident, as if only for the sake of describing the supernatural effect of the hidden voices, but he was concerned to see that Peyton was considerably disturbed by their more material import. After questioning him as to the appearance of the two men, his host said: "I don't mind telling you, Clarence, that as far as that fellow's intentions go he is quite sincere, although his threats are only borrowed thunder. He is a man whom I have just dismissed for carelessness and insolence, — two things that run in double harness in this country, — but I should be more afraid to find him at my back on a dark night, alone on the plains, than to confront him in daylight, in the witness box, against me. He was only repeating a silly rumor that the title to this

rancho and the nine square leagues beyond would be attacked by some speculators."

"But I thought your title was confirmed two years ago," said Clarence.

"The *grant* was confirmed," returned Peyton, "which means that the conveyance of the Mexican government of these lands to the ancestor of Victor Robles was held to be legally proven by the United States Land Commission, and a patent issued to all those who held under it. I and my neighbors hold under it by purchase from Victor Robles, subject to the confirmation of the Land Commission. But that confirmation was only of Victor's *great-grandfather's title*, and it is now alleged that as Victor's father died without making a will, Victor has claimed and disposed of property which he ought to have divided with his *sisters*. At least, some speculating rascals in San Francisco have set up what they call 'the Sisters' title,' and are selling it to actual settlers on the unoccupied lands beyond. As, by the law, it would hold possession against the mere ordinary squatters, whose only right is based, as you know, on the presumption that there is *no title claimed*, it gives the possessor immunity to enjoy the

use of the property until the case is decided, and even should the original title hold good against his, the successful litigant would probably be willing to pay for improvements and possession to save the expensive and tedious process of ejectment."

"But this does not affect *you*, who have already possession?" said Clarence quickly.

"No, not as far as *this house* and the lands I actually *occupy and cultivate* are concerned; and they know that I am safe to fight to the last, and carry the case to the Supreme Court in that case, until the swindle is exposed, or they drop it; but I may have to pay them something to keep the squatters off my *unoccupied* land."

"But you surely would n't recognize those rascals in any way?" said the astonished Clarence.

"As against other rascals? Why not?" returned Peyton grimly. "I only pay for the possession which their sham title gives me to my own land. If by accident that title obtains, I am still on the safe side." After a pause he said, more gravely, "What you overheard, Clarence, shows me that the plan is more forward than I had imagined, and that I may have to fight traitors here."

"I hope, sir," said Clarence, with a quick glow in his earnest face, "that you 'll let me help you. You thought I did once, you remember, — with the Indians."

There was so much of the old Clarence in his boyish appeal and eager, questioning face that Peyton, who had been talking to him as a younger but equal man of affairs, was startled into a smile. "You did, Clarence, though the Indians butchered your friends, after all. I don't know, though, but that your experiences with those Spaniards — you must have known a lot of them when you were with Don Juan Robinson and at the college — might be of service in getting at evidence, or smashing their witnesses if it comes to a fight. But just now, *money* is everything. They must be bought *off the land* if I have to mortgage it for the purpose. That strikes you as a rather heroic remedy, Clarence, eh?" he continued, in his old, half-bantering attitude towards Clarence's inexperienced youth, "don't it?"

But Clarence was not thinking of that. Another more audacious but equally youthful and enthusiastic idea had taken possession of his mind, and he lay awake half that night revolving it. It was true that it was

somewhat impractically mixed with his visions of Mrs. Peyton and Susy, and even included his previous scheme of relief for the improvident and incorrigible Hooker. But it gave a wonderful sincerity and happiness to his slumbers that night, which the wiser and elder Peyton might have envied, and I wot not was in the long run as correct and sagacious as Peyton's sleepless cogitations. And in the early morning Mr. Clarence Brant, the young capitalist, sat down to his traveling-desk and wrote two clear-headed, logical, and practical business letters, — one to his banker, and the other to his former guardian, Don Juan Robinson, — as his first step in a resolve that was, nevertheless, perhaps as wildly quixotic and enthusiastic as any dream his boyish and unselfish heart had ever indulged.

At breakfast, in the charmed freedom of the domestic circle, Clarence forgot Susy's capricious commands of yesterday, and began to address himself to her in his old earnest fashion, until he was warned by a significant knitting of the young lady's brows and monosyllabic responses. But in his youthful loyalty to Mrs. Peyton, he was more pained to notice Susy's occasional un-

conscious indifference to her adopted mother's affectionate expression, and a more conscious disregard of her wishes. So uneasy did he become, in his sensitive concern for Mrs. Peyton's half-concealed mortification, that he gladly accepted Peyton's offer to go with him to visit the farm and corral. As the afternoon approached, with another twinge of self-reproach, he was obliged to invent some excuse to decline certain hospitable plans of Mrs. Peyton's for his entertainment, and at half past three stole somewhat guiltily, with his horse, from the stables. But he had to pass before the outer wall of the garden and *grille*, through which he had seen Mary the day before. Raising his eyes mechanically, he was startled to see Mrs. Peyton standing behind the grating, with her abstracted gaze fixed upon the wind-tossed, level grain beyond her. She smiled as she saw him, but there were traces of tears in her proud, handsome eyes.

"You are going to ride?" she said pleasantly.

"Y-e-es," stammered the shamefaced Clarence.

She glanced at him wistfully.

"You are right. The girls have gone

away by themselves. Mr. Peyton has ridden over to Santa Inez on this dreadful land business, and I suppose you 'd have found him a dull riding companion. It is rather stupid here. I quite envy you, Mr. Brant, your horse and your freedom."

"But, Mrs. Peyton," broke in Clarence, impulsively, "you have a horse — I saw it, a lovely lady's horse — eating its head off in the stable. Won't you let me run back and order it; and won't you, please, come out with me for a good, long gallop?"

He meant what he said. He had spoken quickly, impulsively, but with the perfect understanding in his own mind that his proposition meant the complete abandonment of his rendezvous with Susy. Mrs. Peyton was astounded and slightly stirred with his earnestness, albeit unaware of all it implied.

"It 's a great temptation, Mr. Brant," she said, with a playful smile, which dazzled Clarence with its first faint suggestion of a refined woman's coquetry; "but I 'm afraid that Mr. Peyton would think me going mad in my old age. No. Go on and enjoy your gallop, and if you should see those giddy girls anywhere, send them home early for chocolate, before the cold wind gets up."

She turned, waved her slim white hand playfully in acknowledgment of Clarence's bared head, and moved away.

For the first few moments the young man tried to find relief in furious riding, and in bullying his spirited horse. Then he pulled quickly up. What was he doing? What was he going to do? What foolish, vapid deceit was this that he was going to practice upon that noble, queenly, confiding, generous woman? (He had already forgotten that she had always distrusted him.) What a fool he was not to tell her half-jokingly that he expected to meet Susy! But would he have dared to talk half-jokingly to such a woman on such a topic? And would it have been honorable without disclosing the *whole* truth, — that they had met secretly before? And was it fair to Susy? — dear, innocent, childish Susy! Yet something must be done! It was such trivial, purposeless deceit, after all; for this noble woman, Mrs. Peyton, so kind, so gentle, would never object to his loving Susy and marrying her. And they would all live happily together; and Mrs. Peyton would never be separated from them, but always beaming tenderly upon them as she did just

now in the garden. Yes, he would have a serious understanding with Susy, and that would excuse the clandestine meeting to-day.

His rapid pace, meantime, had brought him to the imperceptible incline of the terrace, and he was astonished, in turning in the saddle, to find that the *casa*, corral, and outbuildings had completely vanished, and that behind him rolled only the long sea of grain, which seemed to have swallowed them in its yellowing depths. Before him lay the wooded ravine through which the stage-coach passed, which was also the entrance to the rancho, and there, too, probably, was the turning of which Susy had spoken. But it was still early for the rendezvous; indeed, he was in no hurry to meet her in his present discontented state, and he made a listless circuit of the field, in the hope of discovering the phenomena that had caused the rancho's mysterious disappearance. When he had found that it was the effect of the different levels, his attention was arrested by a multitude of moving objects in a still more distant field, which proved to be a band of wild horses. In and out among them, circling aimlessly, as it seemed to him, appeared two horsemen apparently

performing some mystic evolution. To add to their singular performance, from time to time one of the flying herd, driven by the horsemen far beyond the circle of its companions, dropped suddenly and unaccountably in full career. The field closed over it as if it had been swallowed up. In a few moments it appeared again, trotting peacefully behind its former pursuer. It was some time before Clarence grasped the meaning of this strange spectacle. Although the clear, dry atmosphere sharply accented the silhouette-like outlines of the men and horses, so great was the distance that the slender forty-foot lasso, which in the skillful hands of the horsemen had effected these captures, was *completely invisible!* The horsemen were Peyton's vaqueros, making a selection from the young horses for the market. He remembered now that Peyton had told him that he might be obliged to raise money by sacrificing some of his stock, and the thought brought back Clarence's uneasiness as he turned again to the trail. Indeed, he was hardly in the vein for a gentle tryst, as he entered the wooded ravine to seek the *madroño* tree which was to serve as a guide to his lady's bower.

A few rods further, under the cool vault filled with woodland spicing, he came upon it. In its summer harlequin dress of scarlet and green, with hanging bells of poly-tinted berries, like some personified sylvan Folly, it seemed a fitting symbol of Susy's childish masquerade of passion. Its bizarre beauty, so opposed to the sober gravity of the sedate pines and hemlocks, made it an unmistakable landmark. Here he dismounted and picketed his horse. And here, beside it, to the right, ran the little trail crawling over mossy boulders; a narrow yellow track through the carpet of pine needles between the closest file of trees; an almost imperceptible streak across pools of chickweed at their roots, and a brown and ragged swath through the ferns. As he went on, the anxiety and uneasiness that had possessed him gave way to a languid intoxication of the senses; the mysterious seclusion of these woodland depths recovered the old influence they had exerted over his boyhood. He was not returning to Susy, as much as to the older love of his youth, of which she was, perhaps, only an incident. It was therefore with an odd boyish thrill again that, coming suddenly upon a little

hollow, like a deserted nest, where the lost trail made him hesitate, he heard the crackle of a starched skirt behind him, was conscious of the subtle odor of freshly ironed and scented muslin, and felt the gentle pressure of delicate fingers upon his eyes.

"Susy!"

"You silly boy! Where were you blundering to? Why didn't you look around you?"

"I thought I would hear your voices."

"Whose voices, idiot?"

"Yours and Mary's," returned Clarence innocently, looking round for the confidante.

"Oh, indeed! Then you wanted to see *Mary?* Well, she 's looking for me somewhere. Perhaps you 'll go and find her, or shall I?"

She was offering to pass him when he laid his hand on hers to detain her. She instantly evaded it, and drew herself up to her full height, incontestably displaying the dignity of the added inches to her skirt. All this was charmingly like the old Susy, but it did not bid fair to help him to a serious interview. And, looking at the pretty, pink, mocking face before him, with the witchery of the woodland still upon him,

he began to think that he had better put it off.

"Never mind about Mary," he said laughingly. "But you said you wanted to see me, Susy; and here I am."

"Said I wanted to see you?" repeated Susy, with her blue eyes lifted in celestial scorn and wonderment. "Said *I* wanted to see you? Are you not mistaken, Mr. Brant? Really, I imagined that you came here to see *me*."

With her fair head upturned, and the leaf of her scarlet lip temptingly curled over, Clarence began to think this latest phase of her extravagance the most fascinating. He drew nearer to her as he said gently, "You know what I mean, Susy. You said yesterday you were troubled. I thought you might have something to tell me."

"I should think it was *you* who might have something to tell me after all these years," she said poutingly, yet self-possessed. "But I suppose you came here only to see Mary and mother. I 'm sure you let them know that plainly enough last evening."

"But you said" — began the stupefied Clarence.

"Never mind what *I* said. It 's always what *I* say, never what *you* say; and you don't say anything."

The woodland influence must have been still very strong upon Clarence that he did not discover in all this that, while Susy's general capriciousness was unchanged, there was a new and singular insincerity in her manifest acting. She was either concealing the existence of some other real emotion, or assuming one that was absent. But he did not notice it, and only replied tenderly: —

"But I want to say a great deal to you, Susy. I want to say that if you still feel as I do, and as I have always felt, and you think you could be happy as *I* would be if — if — we could be always together, we need not conceal it from your mother and father any longer. I am old enough to speak for myself, and I am my own master. Your mother has been very kind to me, — so kind that it does n't seem quite right to deceive her, — and when I tell her that I love you, and that I want you to be my wife, I believe she will give us her blessing."

Susy uttered a strange little laugh, and with an assumption of coyness, that was,

however, still affected, stooped to pick a few berries from a *manzanita* bush.

"I 'll tell you what she 'll say, Clarence. She 'll say you 're frightfully young, and so you are!"

The young fellow tried to echo the laugh, but felt as if he had received a blow. For the first time he was conscious of the truth: this girl, whom he had fondly regarded as a child, had already passed him in the race; she had become a woman before he was yet a man, and now stood before him, maturer in her knowledge, and older in her understanding, of herself and of him. This was the change that had perplexed him; this was the presence that had come between them, — a Susy he had never known before.

She laughed at his changed expression, and then swung herself easily to a sitting posture on the low projecting branch of a hemlock. The act was still girlish, but, nevertheless, she looked down upon him in a superior, patronizing way. "Now, Clarence," she said, with a half-abstracted manner, "don't you be a big fool! If you talk that way to mother, she 'll only tell you to wait two or three years until you know your own mind, and she 'll pack me off to

that horrid school again, besides watching me like a cat every moment you are here. If you want to stay here, and see me sometimes like this, you 'll just behave as you have done, and say nothing. Do you see? Perhaps you don't care to come, or are satisfied with Mary and mother. Say so, then. Goodness knows, I don't want to force you to come here."

Modest and reserved as Clarence was generally, I fear that bashfulness of approach to the other sex was not one of these indications. He walked up to Susy with appalling directness, and passed his arm around her waist. She did not move, but remained looking at him and his intruding arm with a certain critical curiosity, as if awaiting some novel sensation. At which he kissed her. She then slowly disengaged his arm, and said: —

"Really, upon my word, Clarence," in perfectly level tones, and slipped quietly to the ground.

He again caught her in his arms, encircling her disarranged hair and part of the beribboned hat hanging over her shoulder, and remained for an instant holding her thus silently and tenderly. Then she

freed herself with an abstracted air, a half smile, and an unchanged color except where her soft cheek had been abraded by his coat collar.

"You 're a bold, rude boy, Clarence," she said, putting back her hair quietly, and straightening the brim of her hat. "Heaven knows where you learned manners!" and then, from a safer distance, with the same critical look in her violet eyes, "I suppose you think mother would allow *that* if she knew it?"

But Clarence, now completely subjugated, with the memory of the kiss upon him and a heightened color, protested that he only wanted to make their intercourse less constrained, and to have their relations, even their engagement, recognized by her parents; still he would take her advice. Only there was always the danger that if they were discovered she would be sent back to the convent all the same, and his banishment, instead of being the probation of a few years, would be a perpetual separation.

"We could always run away, Clarence," responded the young girl calmly. "There 's nothing the matter with *that*."

Clarence was startled. The idea of deso-

lating the sad, proud, handsome Mrs. Peyton, whom he worshiped, and her kind husband, whom he was just about to serve, was so grotesque and confusing, that he said hopelessly, "Yes."

"Of course," she continued, with the same odd affectation of coyness, which was, however, distinctly uncalled for, as she eyed him from under her broad hat, "you need n't come with me unless you like. I can run away by myself, — if I want to! I 've thought of it before. One can't stand everything!"

"But, Susy," said Clarence, with a swift remorseful recollection of her confidence yesterday, "is there really anything troubles you? Tell me, dear. What is it?"

"Oh, nothing — *everything!* It 's no use, — *you* can't understand! *You* like it, I know you do. I can see it; it 's your style. But it 's stupid, it 's awful, Clarence! With mamma snooping over you and around you all day, with her 'dear child,' 'mamma's pet,' and 'What is it, dear?' and 'Tell it all to your own mamma,' — as if I would! And 'my own mamma,' indeed! As if I did n't know, Clarence, that she *is n't.* And papa, caring for nothing but this hid-

eous, dreary rancho, and the huge, empty plains. It 's worse than school, for there, at least, when you went out, you could see something besides cattle and horses and yellow-faced half-breeds! But here — Lord! it 's only a wonder I have n't run away before!"

Startled and shocked as Clarence was at this revelation, accompanied as it was by a hardness of manner that was new to him, the influence of the young girl was still so strong upon him that he tried to evade it as only an extravagance, and said with a faint smile, "But where would you run to?"

She looked at him cunningly, with her head on one side, and then said: —

"I have friends, and" —

She hesitated, pursing up her pretty lips.

"And what?"

"Relations."

"Relations?"

"Yes, — an aunt by marriage. She lives in Sacramento. She 'd be overjoyed to have me come to her. Her second husband has a theatre there."

"But, Susy, what does Mrs. Peyton know of this?"

"Nothing. Do you think I 'd tell her, and have her buy them up as she has my other relations? Do you suppose I don't know that I 've been bought up like a nigger?"

She looked indignant, compressing her delicate little nostrils, and yet, somehow, Clarence had the same singular impression that she was only acting.

The calling of a far-off voice came faintly through the wood.

"That 's Mary, looking for me," said Susy composedly. "You must go, now, Clarence. Quick! Remember what I said, — and don't breathe a word of this. Good-by."

But Clarence was standing still, breathless, hopelessly disturbed, and irresolute. Then he turned away mechanically towards the trail.

"Well, Clarence?"

She was looking at him half reproachfully, half coquettishly, with smiling, parted lips. He hastened to forget himself and his troubles upon them twice and thrice. Then she quickly disengaged herself, whispered, "Go, now," and, as Mary's call was repeated, Clarence heard her voice, high and

clear, answering, "Here, dear," as he was plunging into the thicket.

He had scarcely reached the *madroño* tree again and remounted his horse, before he heard the sound of hoofs approaching from the road. In his present uneasiness he did not care to be discovered so near the rendezvous, and drew back into the shadow until the horseman should pass. It was Peyton, with a somewhat disturbed face, riding rapidly. Still less was he inclined to join or immediately follow him, but he was relieved when his host, instead of taking the direct road to the rancho, through the wild oats, turned off in the direction of the corral.

A moment later Clarence wheeled into the direct road, and presently found himself in the long afternoon shadows through the thickest of the grain. He was riding slowly, immersed in thought, when he was suddenly startled by a hissing noise at his ear, and what seemed to be the uncoiling stroke of a leaping serpent at his side. Instinctively he threw himself forward on his horse's neck, and as the animal shied into the grain, felt the crawling scrape and jerk of a horsehair lariat across his back and

down his horse's flanks. He reined in indignantly and stood up in his stirrups. Nothing was to be seen above the level of the grain. Beneath him the trailing *riata* had as noiselessly vanished as if it had been indeed a gliding snake. Had he been the victim of a practical joke, or of the blunder of some stupid vacquero? For he made no doubt that it was the lasso of one of the performers he had watched that afternoon. But his preoccupied mind did not dwell long upon it, and by the time he had reached the wall of the old garden, the incident was forgotten.

CHAPTER VI.

Relieved of Clarence Brant's embarrassing presence, Jim Hooker did not, however, refuse to avail himself of that opportunity to expound to the farmer and his family the immense wealth, influence, and importance of the friend who had just left him. Although Clarence's plan had suggested reticence, Hooker could not forego the pleasure of informing them that "Clar" Brant had just offered to let him into an extensive land speculation. He had previously declined a large share or original location in a mine of Clarence's, now worth a million, because it was not "his style." But the land speculation in a country of unsettled titles and lawless men, he need not remind them, required some experience of border warfare. He would not say positively, although he left them to draw their own conclusions with gloomy significance, that this was why Clarence had sought him. With this dark suggestion, he took leave of Mr.

and Mrs. Hopkins and their daughter Phœbe the next day, not without some natural human emotion, and peacefully drove his team and wagon into the settlement of Fair Plains.

He was not prepared, however, for a sudden realization of his imaginative prospects. A few days after his arrival in Fair Plains, he received a letter from Clarence, explaining that he had not time to return to Hooker to consult him, but had, nevertheless, fulfilled his promise, by taking advantage of an opportunity of purchasing the Spanish "Sisters'" title to certain unoccupied lands near the settlement. As these lands in part joined the section already preëmpted and occupied by Hopkins, Clarence thought that Jim Hooker would choose that part for the sake of his neighbor's company. He inclosed a draft on San Francisco, for a sum sufficient to enable Jim to put up a cabin and "stock" the property, which he begged he would consider in the light of a loan, to be paid back in installments, only when the property could afford it. At the same time, if Jim was in difficulty, he was to inform him. The letter closed with a characteristic Clarence-like mingling of enthusiasm

and older wisdom. "I wish you luck, Jim, but I see no reason why you should trust to it. I don't know of anything that could keep you from making yourself independent of any one, if you go to work with a *long aim* and don't fritter away your chances on short ones. If I were you, old fellow, I 'd drop the Plains and the Indians out of my thoughts, or at least out of my *talk*, for a while; they won't help you in the long run. The people who believe you will be jealous of you; those who don't, will look down upon you, and if they get to questioning your little Indian romances, Jim, they 'll be apt to question your civilized facts. That won't help you in the ranching business, and that 's your only real grip now." For the space of two or three hours after this, Jim was reasonably grateful and even subdued, — so much so that his employer, to whom he confided his good fortune, frankly confessed that he believed him from that unusual fact alone. Unfortunately, neither the practical lesson conveyed in this grim admission, nor the sentiment of gratitude, remained long with Jim. Another idea had taken possession of his fancy. Although the land nominated in his bill of sale had

been, except on the occasion of his own temporary halt there, always unoccupied, unsought, and unclaimed, and although he was amply protected by legal certificates, he gravely collected a posse of three or four idlers from Fair Plains, armed them at his own expense, and in the dead of night took belligerent and forcible possession of the peaceful domain which the weak generosity and unheroic dollars of Clarence had purchased for him! A martial camp-fire tempered the chill night winds to the pulses of the invaders, and enabled them to sleep on their arms in the field they had won. The morning sun revealed to the astonished Hopkins family the embattled plain beyond, with its armed sentries. Only then did Jim Hooker condescend to explain the reason of his warlike occupation, with dark hints of the outlying "squatters" and "jumpers," whose incursions their boldness alone had repulsed. The effect of this romantic situation upon the two women, with the slight fascination of danger imported into their quiet lives, may well be imagined. Possibly owing to some incautious questioning by Mr. Hopkins, and some doubts of the discipline and sincerity of his posse, Jim dis-

charged them the next day; but during the erection of his cabin by some peaceful carpenters from the settlement, he returned to his gloomy preoccupation and the ostentatious wearing of his revolvers. As an opulent and powerful neighbor, he took his meals with the family while his house was being built, and generally impressed them with a sense of security they had never missed.

Meantime, Clarence, duly informed of the installation of Jim as his tenant, underwent a severe trial. It was necessary for his plans that this should be kept a secret at present, and this was no easy thing for his habitually frank and open nature. He had once mentioned that he had met Jim at the settlement, but the information was received with such indifference by Susy, and such marked disfavor by Mrs. Peyton, that he said no more. He accompanied Peyton in his rides around the rancho, fully possessed himself of the details of its boundaries, the debatable lands held by the enemy, and listened with beating pulses, but a hushed tongue, to his host's ill-concealed misgivings.

"You see, Clarence, that lower terrace?"

he said, pointing to a far-reaching longitudinal plain beyond the corral; "it extends from my corral to Fair Plains. That is claimed by the sisters' title, and, as things appear to be going, if a division of the land is made it will be theirs. It 's bad enough to have this best grazing land lying just on the flanks of the corral held by these rascals at an absurd prohibitory price, but I am afraid that it may be made to mean something even worse. According to the old surveys, these terraces on different levels were the natural divisions of the property, — one heir or his tenant taking one, and another taking another, — an easy distinction that saved the necessity of boundary fencing or monuments, and gave no trouble to people who were either kinsmen or lived in lazy patriarchal concord. That is the form of division they are trying to reëstablish now. Well," he continued, suddenly lifting his eyes to the young man's flushed face, in some unconscious, sympathetic response to his earnest breathlessness, "although my boundary line extends half a mile into that field, my house and garden and corral *are actually upon that terrace or level*." They certainly appeared to Clarence

to be on the same line as the long field beyond. "If," went on Peyton, "such a decision is made, these men will push on and claim the house and everything on the terrace."

"But," said Clarence quickly, "you said their title was only valuable where they have got or can give *possession*. You already have yours. They can't take it from you except by force."

"No," said Peyton grimly, "nor will they dare to do it as long as I live to fight them."

"But," persisted Clarence, with the same singular hesitancy of manner, "why did n't you purchase possession of at least that part of the land which lies so dangerously near your own house?"

"Because it was held by squatters, who naturally preferred buying what might prove a legal title to their land from these impostors than to sell out their possession to *me* at a fair price."

"But could n't you have bought from them both?" continued Clarence.

"My dear Clarence, I am not a Crœsus nor a fool. Only a man who was both would attempt to treat with these rascals, who would now, of course, insist that *their*

whole claim should be bought up at their own price by the man who was most concerned in defeating them."

He turned away a little impatiently. Fortunately he did not observe that Clarence's averted face was crimson with embarrassment, and that a faint smile hovered nervously about his mouth.

Since his late rendezvous with Susy, Clarence had had no chance to interrogate her further regarding her mysterious relative. That that shadowy presence was more or less exaggerated, if not an absolute myth, he more than half suspected, but of the discontent that had produced it, or the recklessness it might provoke, there was no doubt. She might be tempted to some act of folly. He wondered if Mary Rogers knew it. Yet, with his sensitive ideas of loyalty, he would have shrunk from any confidence with Mary regarding her friend's secrets, although he fancied that Mary's dark eyes sometimes dwelt upon him with mournful consciousness and premonition. He did not imagine the truth, that this romantic contemplation was only the result of Mary's conviction that Susy was utterly unworthy of his love. It so chanced one

morning that the vacquero who brought the post from Santa Inez arrived earlier than usual, and so anticipated the two girls, who usually made a youthful point of meeting him first as he passed the garden wall. The letter bag was consequently delivered to Mrs. Peyton in the presence of the others, and a look of consternation passed between the young girls. But Mary quickly seized upon the bag as if with girlish and mischievous impatience, opened it, and glanced within it.

"There are only three letters for you," she said, handing them to Clarence, with a quick look of significance, which he failed to comprehend, "and nothing for me or Susy."

"But," began the innocent Clarence, as his first glance at the letters showed him that one was directed to Susy, "here is" —

A wicked pinch on his arm that was nearest Mary stopped his speech, and he quickly put the letters in his pocket.

"Did n't you understand that Susy don't want her mother to see that letter?" asked Mary impatiently, when they were alone a moment later.

"No," said Clarence simply, handing her the missive.

Mary took it and turned it over in her hands.

"It 's in a man's handwriting," she said innocently.

"I had n't noticed it," returned Clarence with invincible naïveté, "but perhaps it is."

"And you hand it over for me to give to Susy, and ain't a bit curious to know who it 's from?"

"No," returned Clarence, opening his big eyes in smiling and apologetic wonder.

"Well," responded the young lady, with a long breath of melancholy astonishment, "certainly, of all things you are — you really *are!*" With which incoherency — apparently perfectly intelligible to herself — she left him. She had not herself the slightest idea who the letter was from; she only knew that Susy wanted it concealed.

The incident made little impression on Clarence, except as part of the general uneasiness he felt in regard to his old playmate. It seemed so odd to him that this worry should come from *her*, — that she herself should form the one discordant note in the Arcadian dream that he had found so sweet; in his previous imaginings it was the presence of Mrs. Peyton which he had

dreaded; she whose propinquity now seemed so full of gentleness, reassurance, and repose. How worthy she seemed of any sacrifice he could make for her! He had seen little of her for the last two or three days, although her smile and greeting were always ready for him. Poor Clarence did not dream that she had found from certain incontestable signs and tokens, both in the young ladies and himself, that he did not require watching, and that becoming more resigned to Susy's indifference, which seemed so general and passive in quality, she was no longer tortured by the sting of jealousy.

Finding himself alone that afternoon, the young man had wandered somewhat listlessly beyond the low adobe gateway. The habits of the siesta obtained in a modified form at the rancho. After luncheon, its masters and employees usually retired, not so much from the torrid heat of the afternoon sun, but from the first harrying of the afternoon trades, whose monotonous whistle swept round the walls. A straggling passion vine near the gate beat and struggled against the wind. Clarence had stopped near it, and was gazing with worried ab-

straction across the tossing fields, when a soft voice called his name.

It was a pleasant voice, — Mrs. Peyton's. He glanced back at the gateway; it was empty. He looked quickly to the right and left; no one was there.

The voice spoke again with the musical addition of a laugh; it seemed to come from the passion vine. Ah, yes; behind it, and half overgrown by its branches, was a long, narrow embrasured opening in the wall, defended by the usual Spanish grating, and still further back, as in the frame of a picture, the half length figure of Mrs. Peyton, very handsome and striking, too, with a painted picturesqueness from the effect of the checkered light and shade.

"You looked so tired and bored out there," she said. "I am afraid you are finding it very dull at the rancho. The prospect is certainly not very enlivening from where you stand."

Clarence protested with a visible pleasure in his eyes, as he held back a spray before the opening.

"If you are not afraid of being worse bored, come in here and talk with me. You have never seen this part of the house, I

think, — my own sitting-room. You reach it from the hall in the gallery. But Lola or Anita will show you the way."

He reëntered the gateway, and quickly found the hall, — a narrow, arched passage, whose black, tunnel-like shadows were absolutely unaffected by the vivid, colorless glare of the courtyard without, seen through an opening at the end. The contrast was sharp, blinding, and distinct; even the edges of the opening were black; the outer light halted on the threshold and never penetrated within. The warm odor of verbena and dried rose leaves stole from a half-open door somewhere in the cloistered gloom. Guided by it, Clarence presently found himself on the threshold of a low-vaulted room. Two other narrow embrasured windows like the one he had just seen, and a fourth, wider latticed casement, hung with gauze curtains, suffused the apartment with a clear, yet mysterious twilight that seemed its own. The gloomy walls were warmed by bright-fringed bookshelves, topped with trifles of light feminine coloring and adornment. Low easy-chairs and a lounge, small fanciful tables, a dainty desk, gayly colored baskets of worsteds or mysterious kaleido-

scopic fragments, and vases of flowers pervaded the apartment with a mingled sense of grace and comfort. There was a womanly refinement in its careless negligence, and even the delicate wrapper of Japanese silk, gathered at the waist and falling in easy folds to the feet of the graceful mistress of this charming disorder, looked a part of its refined abandonment.

Clarence hesitated as on the threshold of some sacred shrine. But Mrs. Peyton, with her own hands, cleared a space for him on the lounge.

"You will easily suspect from all this disorder, Mr. Brant, that I spend a greater part of my time here, and that I seldom see much company. Mr. Peyton occasionally comes in long enough to stumble over a footstool or upset a vase, and I think Mary and Susy avoid it from a firm conviction that there is work concealed in these baskets. But I have my books here, and in the afternoons, behind these thick walls, one forgets the incessant stir and restlessness of the dreadful winds outside. Just now you were foolish enough to tempt them while you were nervous, or worried, or listless. Take my word for it, it 's a great

mistake. There is no more use fighting them, as I tell Mr. Peyton, than of fighting the people born under them. I have my own opinion that these winds were sent only to stir this lazy race of mongrels into activity, but they are enough to drive us Anglo-Saxons into nervous frenzy. Don't you think so? But you are young and energetic, and perhaps you are not affected by them."

She spoke pleasantly and playfully, yet with a certain nervous tension of voice and manner that seemed to illustrate her theory. At least, Clarence, in quick sympathy with her slightest emotion, was touched by it. There is no more insidious attraction in the persons we admire, than the belief that we know and understand their unhappiness, and that our admiration for them is lifted higher than a mere mutual instinctive sympathy with beauty or strength. This adorable woman had suffered. The very thought aroused his chivalry. It loosened, also, I fear, his quick, impulsive tongue.

Oh, yes; he knew it. He had lived under this whip of air and sky for three years, alone in a Spanish rancho, with only the native *peons* around him, and scarcely

speaking his own tongue even to his guardian. He spent his mornings on horseback in fields like these, until the *vientos generales*, as they called them, sprang up and drove him nearly frantic; and his only relief was to bury himself among the books in his guardian's library, and shut out the world, — just as she did. The smile which hovered around the lady's mouth at that moment arrested Clarence, with a quick remembrance of their former relative positions, and a sudden conviction of his familiarity in suggesting an equality of experience, and he blushed. But Mrs. Peyton diverted his embarrassment with an air of interested absorption in his story, and said: —

"Then you know these people thoroughly, Mr. Brant? I am afraid that *we* do not."

Clarence had already gathered that fact within the last few days, and, with his usual impulsive directness, said so. A slight knitting of Mrs. Peyton's brows passed off, however, as he quickly and earnestly went on to say that it was impossible for the Peytons in their present relations to the natives to judge them, or to be judged by them fairly. How they were a childlike

race, credulous and trustful, but, like all credulous and trustful people, given to retaliate when imposed upon with a larger insincerity, exaggeration, and treachery. How they had seen their houses and lands occupied by strangers, their religion scorned, their customs derided, their patriarchal society invaded by hollow civilization or frontier brutality — all this fortified by incident and illustration, the outcome of some youthful experience, and given with the glowing enthusiasm of conviction. Mrs. Peyton listened with the usual divided feminine interest between subject and speaker.

Where did this rough, sullen boy — as she had known him — pick up this delicate and swift perception, this reflective judgment, and this odd felicity of expression? It was not possible that it was in him while he was the companion of her husband's servants or the recognized "chum" of the scamp Hooker. No. But if *he* could have changed like this, why not Susy? Mrs. Peyton, in the conservatism of her sex, had never been quite free from fears of her adopted daughter's hereditary instincts; but, with this example before her, she now

took heart. Perhaps the change was coming slowly; perhaps even now what she thought was indifference and coldness was only some abnormal preparation or condition. But she only smiled and said: —

"Then, if you think those people have been wronged, you are not on our side, Mr. Brant?"

What to an older and more worldly man would have seemed, and probably was, only a playful reproach, struck Clarence deeply, and brought his pent-up feelings to his lips.

"*You* have never wronged them. You could n't do it; it is n't in your nature. I am on *your* side, and for you and yours always, Mrs. Peyton. From the first time I saw you on the plains, when I was brought, a ragged boy, before you by your husband, I think I would gladly have laid down my life for you. I don't mind telling you now that I was even jealous of poor Susy, so anxious was I for the smallest share in your thoughts, if only for a moment. You could have done anything with me you wished, and I should have been happy, — far happier than I have been ever since. I tell you this, Mrs. Peyton, now, because you have just doubted if I might be 'on your side,'

but I have been longing to tell it all to you before, and it is that I am ready to do anything you want, — all you want, — to be on *your side* and *at your side*, now and forever."

He was so earnest and hearty, and above all so appallingly and blissfully happy, in this relief of his feelings, smiling as if it were the most natural thing in the world, and so absurdly unconscious of his twenty-two years, his little brown curling mustache, the fire in his wistful, yearning eyes, and, above all, of his clasped hands and lover-like attitude, that Mrs. Peyton — at first rigid as stone, then suffused to the eyes — cast a hasty glance round the apartment, put her handkerchief to her face, and laughed like a girl.

At which Clarence, by no means discomposed, but rather accepting her emotion as perfectly natural, joined her heartily, and added: —

"It 's so, Mrs. Peyton; I 'm glad I told you. You don't mind it, do you?"

But Mrs. Peyton had resumed her gravity, and perhaps a touch of her previous misgivings.

"I should certainly be very sorry," she

said, looking at him critically, "to object to your sharing your old friendship for your little playmate with her parents and guardians, or to your expressing it to *them* as frankly as to her."

She saw the quick change in his mobile face and the momentary arrest of its happy expression. She was frightened and yet puzzled. It was not the sensitiveness of a lover at the mention of the loved one's name, and yet it suggested an uneasy consciousness. If his previous impulsive outburst had been prompted honestly, or even artfully, by his passion for Susy, why had he looked so shocked when she spoke of her?

But Clarence, whose emotion had been caused by the sudden recall of his knowledge of Susy's own disloyalty to the woman whose searching eyes were upon him, in his revulsion against the deceit was, for an instant, upon the point of divulging all. Perhaps, if Mrs. Peyton had shown more confidence, he would have done so, and materially altered the evolution of this story. But, happily, it is upon these slight human weaknesses that your romancer depends, and Clarence, with no other reason than the instinctive sympathy of youth with youth in

its opposition to wisdom and experience, let the opportunity pass, and took the responsibility of it out of the hands of this chronicler.

Howbeit, to cover his confusion, he seized upon the second idea that was in his mind, and stammered, "Susy! Yes, I wanted to speak to you about her." Mrs. Peyton held her breath, but the young man went on, although hesitatingly, with evident sincerity. "Have you heard from any of her relations since — since — you adopted her?"

It seemed a natural enough question, although not the *sequitur* she had expected. "No," she said carelessly. "It was well understood, after the nearest relation — an aunt by marriage — had signed her consent to Susy's adoption, that there should be no further intercourse with the family. There seemed to us no necessity for reopening the past, and Susy herself expressed no desire." She stopped, and again fixing her handsome eyes on Clarence, said, "Do you know any of them?"

But Clarence by this time had recovered himself, and was able to answer carelessly and truthfully that he did not. Mrs. Peyton, still regarding him closely, added some-

what deliberately, "It matters little now what relations she has; Mr. Peyton and I have complete legal control over her until she is of age, and we can easily protect her from any folly of her own or others, or from any of the foolish fancies that sometimes overtake girls of her age and inexperience."

To her utter surprise, however, Clarence uttered a faint sigh of relief, and his face again recovered its expression of boyish happiness. "I 'm glad of it, Mrs. Peyton," he said heartily. "No one could understand better what is for her interest in all things than yourself. Not," he said, with hasty and equally hearty loyalty to his old playmate, "that I think she would ever go against your wishes, or do anything that she knows to be wrong, but she is very young and innocent, — as much of a child as ever, don't you think so, Mrs. Peyton?"

It was amusing, yet nevertheless puzzling, to hear this boyish young man comment upon Susy's girlishness. And Clarence was serious, for he had quite forgotten in Mrs. Peyton's presence the impression of superiority which Susy had lately made upon him. But Mrs. Peyton returned to the charge, or, rather, to an attack upon what

she conceived to be Clarence's old position.

"I suppose she does seem girlish compared to Mary Rogers, who is a much more reserved and quiet nature. But Mary is very charming, Mr. Brant, and I am really delighted to have her here with Susy. She has such lovely dark eyes and such good manners. She has been well brought up, and it is easy to see that her friends are superior people. I must write to them to thank them for her visit, and beg them to let her stay longer. I think you said you did n't know them?"

But Clarence, whose eyes had been thoughtfully and admiringly wandering over every characteristic detail of the charming apartment, here raised them to its handsome mistress, with an apologetic air and a "No" of such unaffected and complete abstraction, that she was again dumbfounded. Certainly, it could not be Mary in whom he was interested.

Abandoning any further inquisition for the present, she let the talk naturally fall upon the books scattered about the tables. The young man knew them all far better than she did, with a cognate knowledge of

others of which she had never heard. She found herself in the attitude of receiving information from this boy, whose boyishness, however, seemed to have evaporated, whose tone had changed with the subject, and who now spoke with the conscious reserve of knowledge. Decidedly, she must have grown rusty in her seclusion. This came, she thought bitterly, of living alone; of her husband's preoccupation with the property; of Susy's frivolous caprices. At the end of eight years to be outstripped by a former cattle-boy of her husband's, and to have her French corrected in a matter of fact way by this recent pupil of the priests, was really too bad! Perhaps he even looked down upon Susy! She smiled dangerously but suavely.

"You must have worked *so* hard to educate yourself from nothing, Mr. Brant. You could n't read, I think, when you first came to us. No? Could you really? I know it has been very difficult for Susy to get on with her studies in proportion. We had so much to first eradicate in the way of manners, style, and habits of thought which the poor child had picked up from her companions, and for which *she* was not respon-

sible. Of course, with a boy that does not signify," she added, with feline gentleness.

But the barbed speech glanced from the young man's smoothly smiling abstraction.

"Ah, yes. But those were happy days, Mrs. Peyton," he answered, with an exasperating return of his previous boyish enthusiasm, "perhaps because of our ignorance. I don't think that Susy and I are any happier for knowing that the plains are not as flat as we believed they were, and that the sun does n't have to burn a hole in them every night when it sets. But I know I believed that *you* knew everything. When I once saw you smiling over a book in your hand, I thought it must be a different one from any that I had ever seen, and perhaps made expressly for you. I can see you there still. Do you know," quite confidentially, "that you reminded me — of course *you* were much younger — of what I remembered of my mother?"

But Mrs. Peyton's reply of "Ah, indeed," albeit polite, indicated some coldness and lack of animation. Clarence rose quickly, but cast a long and lingering look around him.

"You will come again, Mr. Brant," said

the lady more graciously. "If you are going to ride now, perhaps you would try to meet Mr. Peyton. He is late already, and I am always uneasy when he is out alone, — particularly on one of those half-broken horses, which they consider good enough for riding here. *You* have ridden them before and understand them, but I am afraid that 's another thing *we* have got to learn."

When the young man found himself again confronting the glittering light of the courtyard, he remembered the interview and the soft twilight of the boudoir only as part of a pleasant dream. There was a rude awakening in the fierce wind, which had increased with the lengthening shadows. It seemed to sweep away the half-sensuous comfort that had pervaded him, and made him coldly realize that he had done nothing to solve the difficulties of his relations to Susy. He had lost the one chance of confiding to Mrs. Peyton, — if he had ever really intended to do so. It was impossible for him to do it hereafter without a confession of prolonged deceit.

He reached the stables impatiently, where his attention was attracted by the sound of excited voices in the corral. Looking

within, he was concerned to see that one of the vacqueros was holding the dragging bridle of a blown, dusty, and foam-covered horse, around whom a dozen idlers were gathered. Even beneath its coating of dust and foam and the half-displaced saddle blanket, Clarence immediately recognized the spirited *pinto* mustang which Peyton had ridden that morning.

"What 's the matter?" said Clarence, from the gateway.

The men fell apart, glancing at each other. One said quickly in Spanish: —

"Say nothing to *him*. It is an affair of the house."

But this brought Clarence down like a bombshell among them, not to be overlooked in his equal command of their tongue and of them. "Ah! come, now. What drunken piggishness is this? Speak!"

"The *padron* has been — perhaps — thrown," stammered the first speaker. "His horse arrives, — but he does not. We go to inform the señora."

"No, you don't! mules and imbeciles! Do you want to frighten her to death? Mount, every one of you, and follow me!"

The men hesitated, but for only a moment. Clarence had a fine assortment of

Spanish epithets, expletives, and objurgations, gathered in his *rodeo* experience at El Refugio, and laid them about him with such fervor and discrimination that two or three mules, presumably with guilty consciences, mistaking their direction, actually cowered against the stockade of the corral in fear. In another moment the vacqueros had hastily mounted, and, with Clarence at their head, were dashing down the road towards Santa Inez. Here he spread them in open order in the grain, on either side of the track, himself taking the road.

They did not proceed very far. For when they had reached the gradual slope which marked the decline to the second terrace, Clarence, obeying an instinct as irresistible as it was unaccountable, which for the last few moments had been forcing itself upon him, ordered a halt. The *casa* and corral had already sunk in the plain behind them; it was the spot where the lasso had been thrown at him a few evenings before! Bidding the men converge slowly towards the road, he went on more cautiously, with his eyes upon the track before him. Presently he stopped. There was a ragged displacement of the cracked and

crumbling soil and the unmistakable scoop of kicking hoofs. As he stooped to examine them, one of the men at the right uttered a shout. By the same strange instinct Clarence knew that Peyton was found!

He was, indeed, lying there among the wild oats at the right of the road, but without trace of life or scarcely human appearance. His clothes, where not torn and shredded away, were partly turned inside out; his shoulders, neck, and head were a shapeless, undistinguishable mask of dried earth and rags, like a mummy wrapping. His left boot was gone. His large frame seemed boneless, and, except for the cerements of his mud-stiffened clothing, was limp and sodden.

Clarence raised his head suddenly from a quick examination of the body, and looked at the men around him. One of them was already cantering away. Clarence instantly threw himself on his horse, and, putting spurs to the animal, drew a revolver from his holster and fired over the man's head. The rider turned in his saddle, saw his pursuer, and pulled up.

"Go back," said Clarence, "or my next shot won't *miss* you."

"I was only going to inform the señora," said the man with a shrug and a forced smile.

"*I* will do that," said Clarence grimly, driving him back with him into the waiting circle; then turning to them he said slowly, with deliberate, smileless irony, "And now, my brave gentlemen, — knights of the bull and gallant mustang hunters, — *I* want to inform *you* that I believe that Mr. Peyton was *murdered*, and if the man who killed him is anywhere this side of hell, *I* intend to find him. Good! You understand me! Now lift up the body, — you two, by the shoulders; you two, by the feet. Let your horses follow. For I intend that you four shall carry home your master in your arms, on foot. Now forward to the corral by the back trail. Disobey me, or step out of line and" — He raised the revolver ominously.

If the change wrought in the dead man before them was weird and terrifying, no less distinct and ominous was the change that, during the last few minutes, had come over the living speaker. For it was no longer the youthful Clarence who sat there, but a haggard, prematurely worn, desperate-looking avenger, lank of cheek, and injected

of eye, whose white teeth glistened under the brown mustache and thin pale lips that parted when his restrained breath now and then hurriedly escaped them.

As the procession moved on, two men slunk behind with the horses.

"Mother of God! Who is this wolf's whelp?" said Manuel.

"Hush!" said his companion in a terrified whisper. "Have you not heard? It is the son of Hamilton Brant, the assassin, the duelist, — he who was fusiladed in Sonora." He made the sign of the cross quickly. "Jesus Maria! Let them look out who have cause, for the blood of his father is in him!"

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT other speech passed between Clarence and Peyton's retainers was not known, but not a word of the interview seemed to have been divulged by those present. It was generally believed and accepted that Judge Peyton met his death by being thrown from his half-broken mustang, and dragged at its heels, and medical opinion, hastily summoned from Santa Inez after the body had been borne to the corral, and stripped of its hideous encasings, declared that the neck had been broken, and death had followed instantaneously. An inquest was deemed unnecessary.

Clarence had selected Mary to break the news to Mrs. Peyton, and the frightened young girl was too much struck with the change still visible in his face, and the half authority of his manner, to decline, or even to fully appreciate the calamity that had befallen them. After the first benumbing shock, Mrs. Peyton passed into that strange

exaltation of excitement brought on by the immediate necessity for action, followed by a pallid calm, which the average spectator too often unfairly accepts as incongruous, inadequate, or artificial. There had also occurred one of those strange compensations that wait on Death or disrupture by catastrophe: such as the rude shaking down of an unsettled life, the forcible realization of what were vague speculations, the breaking of old habits and traditions, and the unloosing of half-conscious bonds. Mrs. Peyton, without insensibility to her loss or disloyalty to her affections, nevertheless felt a relief to know that she was now really Susy's guardian, free to order her new life wherever and under what conditions she chose as most favorable to it, and that she could dispose of this house that was wearying to her when Susy was away, and which the girl herself had always found insupportable. She could settle this question of Clarence's relations to her daughter out of hand without advice or opposition. She had a brother in the East, who would be summoned to take care of the property. This consideration for the living pursued her, even while the dead man's presence still awed

the hushed house; it was in her thoughts as she stood beside his bier and adjusted the flowers on his breast, which no longer moved for or against these vanities; and it stayed with her even in the solitude of her darkened room.

But if Mrs. Peyton was deficient, it was Susy who filled the popular idea of a mourner, and whose emotional attitude of a grief-stricken daughter left nothing to be desired. It was she who, when the house was filled with sympathizing friends from San Francisco and the few near neighbors who had hurried with condolences, was overflowing in her reminiscences of the dead man's goodness to her, and her own undying affection; who recalled ominous things that he had said, and strange premonitions of her own, the result of her ever-present filial anxiety; it was she who had hurried home that afternoon, impelled with vague fears of some impending calamity; it was she who drew a picture of Peyton as a doting and almost too indulgent parent, which Mary Rogers failed to recognize, and which brought back vividly to Clarence's recollection her own childish exaggerations of the Indian massacre. I am far from saying

that she was entirely insincere or merely acting at these moments; at times she was taken with a mild hysteria, brought on by the exciting intrusion of this real event in her monotonous life, by the attentions of her friends, the importance of her suffering as an only child, and the advancement of her position as the heiress of the Robles Rancho. If her tears were near the surface, they were at least genuine, and filmed her violet eyes and reddened her pretty eyelids quite as effectually as if they had welled from the depths of her being. Her black frock lent a matured dignity to her figure, and paled her delicate complexion with the refinement of suffering. Even Clarence was moved in that dark and haggard abstraction that had settled upon him since his strange outbreak over the body of his old friend.

The extent of that change had not been noticed by Mrs. Peyton, who had only observed that Clarence had treated her grief with a grave and silent respect. She was grateful for that. A repetition of his boyish impulsiveness would have been distasteful to her at such a moment. She only thought him more mature and more sub-

dued, and as the only man now in her household his services had been invaluable in the emergency.

The funeral had taken place at Santa Inez, where half the county gathered to pay their last respects to their former fellow-citizen and neighbor, whose legal and combative victories they had admired, and whom death had lifted into a public character. The family were returning to the house the same afternoon, Mrs. Peyton and the girls in one carriage, the female house-servants in another, and Clarence on horseback. They had reached the first plateau, and Clarence was riding a little in advance, when an extraordinary figure, rising from the grain beyond, began to gesticulate to him wildly. Checking the driver of the first carriage, Clarence bore down upon the stranger. To his amazement it was Jim Hooker. Mounted on a peaceful, unwieldy plough horse, he was nevertheless accoutred and armed after his most extravagant fashion. In addition to a heavy rifle across his saddle-bow he was weighted down with a knife and revolvers. Clarence was in no mood for trifling, and almost rudely demanded his business.

"Gord, Clarence, it ain't foolin'. The Sisters' title was decided yesterday."

"I knew it, you fool! It 's *your* title! You were already on your land and in possession. What the devil are you doing *here?*"

"Yes, — but," stammered Jim, "all the boys holding that title moved up here to 'make the division' and grab all they could. And I followed. And I found out that they were going to grab Judge Peyton's house, because it was on the line, if they could, and findin' you was all away, by Gord *they did!* and they 're in it! And I stoled out and rode down here to warn ye."

He stopped, looked at Clarence, glanced darkly around him and then down on his accoutrements. Even in that supreme moment of sincerity, he could not resist the possibilities of the situation.

"It 's as much as my life 's worth," he said gloomily. "But," with a dark glance at his weapons, "I 'll sell it dearly."

"Jim!" said Clarence, in a terrible voice, "you 're not lying again?"

"No," said Jim hurriedly. "I swear it, Clarence! No! Honest Injin this time. And look. I 'll help you. They ain't ex-

pectin' you yet, and they think ye 'll come by the road. Ef I raised a scare off there by the corral, while you 're creepin' *round by the back*, mebbe you could get in while they 're all lookin' for ye in front, don't you see? I 'll raise a big row, and they need n't know but what ye 've got wind of it and brought a party with you from Santa Inez."

In a flash Clarence had wrought a feasible plan out of Jim's fantasy.

"Good," he said, wringing his old companion's hand. "Go back quietly now; hang round the corral, and when you see the carriage climbing the last terrace raise your alarm. Don't mind how loud it is, there 'll be nobody but the servants in the carriages."

He rode quickly back to the first carriage, at whose window Mrs. Peyton's calm face was already questioning him. He told her briefly and concisely of the attack, and what he proposed to do.

"You have shown yourself so strong in matters of worse moment than this," he added quietly, "that I have no fears for your courage. I have only to ask you to trust yourself to me, to put you back at once

in your own home. Your presence there, just now, is the one important thing, whatever happens afterwards."

She recognized his maturer tone and determined manner, and nodded assent. More than that, a faint fire came into her handsome eyes; the two girls kindled their own at that flaming beacon, and sat with flushed cheeks and suspended, indignant breath. They were Western Americans, and not over much used to imposition.

"You must get down before we raise the hill, and follow me on foot through the grain. I was thinking," he added, turning to Mrs. Peyton, "of your boudoir window."

She had been thinking of it, too, and nodded.

"The vine has loosened the bars," he said.

"If it has n't, we must squeeze through them," she returned simply.

At the end of the terrace Clarence dismounted, and helped them from the carriage. He then gave directions to the coachmen to follow the road slowly to the corral in front of the *casa*, and tied his horse behind the second carriage. Then, with Mrs. Peyton and the two young girls, he plunged into the grain.

It was hot, it was dusty; their thin shoes slipped in the crumbling adobe, and the great blades caught in their crape draperies, but they uttered no complaint. Whatever ulterior thought was in their minds, they were bent only on one thing at that moment, — on entering the house at any hazard. Mrs. Peyton had lived long enough on the frontier to know the magic power of *possession*. Susy already was old enough to feel the acute feminine horror of the profanation of her own belongings by alien hands. Clarence, more cognizant of the whole truth than the others, was equally silent and determined; and Mary Rogers was fired with the zeal of loyalty.

Suddenly a series of blood-curdling yells broke from the direction of the corral, and they stopped. But Clarence at once recognized the well-known war-whoop imitation of Jim Hooker, — infinitely more gruesome and appalling than the genuine aboriginal challenge. A half dozen shots fired in quick succession had evidently the same friendly origin.

"Now is our time," said Clarence eagerly. "We must run for the house."

They had fortunately reached by this time

the angle of the adobe wall of the *casa*, and the long afternoon shadows of the building were in their favor. They pressed forward eagerly with the sounds of Jim Hooker's sham encounter still in their ears, mingled with answering shouts of defiance from strange voices within the building towards the front.

They rapidly skirted the wall, even passing boldly before the back gateway, which seemed empty and deserted, and the next moment stood beside the narrow window of the boudoir. Clarence's surmises were correct; the iron grating was not only loose, but yielded to a vigorous wrench, the vine itself acting as a lever to pull out the rusty bars. The young man held out his hand, but Mrs. Peyton, with the sudden agility of a young girl, leaped into the window, followed by Mary and Susy. The inner casement yielded to her touch; the next moment they were within the room. Then Mrs. Peyton's flushed and triumphant face reappeared at the window.

"It 's all right; the men are all in the courtyard, or in the front of the house. The boudoir door is strong, and we can bolt them out."

"It won't be necessary," said Clarence quietly; "you will not be disturbed."

"But are you not coming in?" she asked timidly, holding the window open.

Clarence looked at her with his first faint smile since Peyton's death.

"Of course I am, but not in *that* way. I am going in by *the front gate.*"

She would have detained him, but, with a quick wave of his hand, he left her, and ran swiftly around the wall of the *casa* toward the front. The gate was half open; a dozen excited men were gathered before it and in the archway, and among them, whitened with dust, blackened with powder, and apparently glutted with rapine, and still holding a revolver in his hand, was Jim Hooker! As Clarence approached, the men quickly retreated inside the gate and closed it, but not before he had exchanged a meaning glance with Jim. When he reached the gate, a man from within roughly demanded his business.

"I wish to see the leader of this party," said Clarence quietly.

"I reckon you do," returned the man, with a short laugh. "But I kalkilate *he* don't return the compliment."

"He probably will when he reads this note to his employer," continued Clarence still coolly, selecting a paper from his pocket-book. It was addressed to Francisco Robles, Superintendent of the Sisters' Title, and directed him to give Mr. Clarence Brant free access to the property and the fullest information concerning it. The man took it, glanced at it, looked again at Clarence, and then passed the paper to a third man among the group in the courtyard. The latter read it, and approached the gate carelessly.

"Well, what do you want?"

"I am afraid you have the advantage of me in being able to transact business through bars," said Clarence, with slow but malevolent distinctness, "and as mine is important, I think you had better open the gate to me."

The slight laugh that his speech had evoked from the bystanders was checked as the leader retorted angrily: —

"That 's all very well; but how do I know that you 're the man represented in that letter? Pancho Robles may know you, but *I* don't."

"That you can find out very easily," said

Clarence. "There is a man among your party who knows me, — Mr. Hooker. Ask him."

The man turned, with a quick mingling of surprise and suspicion, to the gloomy, imperturbable Hooker. Clarence could not hear the reply of that young gentleman, but it was evidently not wanting in his usual dark, enigmatical exaggeration. The man surlily opened the gate.

"All the same," he said, still glancing suspiciously at Hooker, "I don't see what *he* 's got to do with you."

"A great deal," said Clarence, entering the courtyard, and stepping into the veranda; "*he 's one of my tenants.*"

"Your *what?*" said the man, with a coarse laugh of incredulity.

"My tenants," repeated Clarence, glancing around the courtyard carelessly. Nevertheless, he was relieved to notice that the three or four Mexicans of the party did not seem to be old retainers of the rancho. There was no evidence of the internal treachery he had feared.

"Your *tenants!*" echoed the man, with an uneasy glance at the faces of the others.

"Yes," said Clarence, with business brev-

ity; "and, for the matter of that, although I have no reason to be particularly proud of it, *so are you all.* You ask my business here. It seems to be the same as yours, — to hold possession of this house! With this difference, however," he continued, taking a document from his pocket. "Here is the certificate, signed by the County Clerk, of the bill of sale of the entire Sisters' title to *me.* It includes the whole two leagues from Fair Plains to the old boundary line of this rancho, which you forcibly entered this morning. There is the document; examine it if you like. The only shadow of a claim you could have to this property you would have to derive from *me.* The only excuse you could have for this act of lawlessness would be orders from *me.* And all that you have done this morning is only the assertion of *my* legal right to this house. If I disavow your act, as I might, I leave you as helpless as any tramp that was ever kicked from a doorstep, — as any burglar that was ever collared on the fence by a constable."

It was the truth. There was no denying the authority of the document, the facts of the situation, or its ultimate power and sig-

nificance. There was consternation, stupefaction, and even a half-humorous recognition of the absurdity of their position on most of the faces around him. Incongruous as the scene was, it was made still more grotesque by the attitude of Jim Hooker. Ruthlessly abandoning the party of convicted trespassers, he stalked gloomily over to the side of Clarence, with the air of having been all the time scornfully in the secret and a mien of wearied victoriousness, and thus halting, he disdainfully expectorated tobacco juice on the ground between him and his late companions, as if to form a line of demarcation. The few Mexicans began to edge towards the gateway. This defection of his followers recalled the leader, who was no coward, to himself again.

"Shut the gate, there!" he shouted.

As its two sides clashed together again, he turned deliberately to Clarence.

"That 's all very well, young man, as regards the *title*. You may have *bought* up the land, and legally own every square inch of howling wilderness between this and San Francisco, and I wish you joy of your d——d fool's bargain; you may have got a whole circus like that," pointing to the gloomy

Jim, "at your back. But with all your money and all your friends you 've forgotten one thing. You have n't got possession, and we have."

"That 's just where we differ," said Clarence coolly, "for if you take the trouble to examine the house, you will see that it is already in possession of Mrs. Peyton, — *my tenant.*"

He paused to give effect to his revelations. But he was, nevertheless, unprepared for an unrehearsed dramatic situation. Mrs. Peyton, who had been tired of waiting, and was listening in the passage, at the mention of her name, entered the gallery, followed by the young ladies. The slight look of surprise upon her face at the revelation she had just heard of Clarence's ownership, only gave the suggestion of her having been unexpectedly disturbed in her peaceful seclusion. One of the Mexicans turned pale, with a frightened glance at the passage, as if he expected the figure of the dead man to follow.

The group fell back. The game was over, — and lost. No one recognized it more quickly than the gamblers themselves. More than that, desperate and lawless as

they were, they still retained the chivalry of Western men, and every hat was slowly doffed to the three black figures that stood silently in the gallery. And even apologetic speech began to loosen the clenched teeth of the discomfited leader.

"We — were — told there was no one in the house," he stammered.

"And it was the truth," said a pert, youthful, yet slightly affected voice. "For we climbed into the window just as you came in at the gate."

It was Susy's words that stung their ears again; but it was Susy's pretty figure, suddenly advanced and in a slightly theatrical attitude, that checked their anger. There had been a sudden ominous silence, as the whole plot of rescue seemed to be revealed to them in those audacious words. But a sense of the ludicrous, which too often was the only perception that ever mitigated the passions of such assemblies, here suddenly asserted itself. The leader burst into a loud laugh, which was echoed by the others, and, with waving hats, the whole party swept peacefully out through the gate.

"But what does all this mean about *your* purchasing the land, Mr. Brant?" said Mrs.

Peyton quickly, fixing her eyes intently on Clarence.

A faint color — the useless protest of his truthful blood — came to his cheek.

"The house is *yours*, and yours alone, Mrs. Peyton. The purchase of the sisters' title was a private arrangement between Mr. Peyton and myself, in view of an emergency like this."

She did not, however, take her proud, searching eyes from his face, and he was forced to turn away.

"It was *so* like dear, good, thoughtful papa," said Susy. "Why, bless me," in a lower voice, "if that is n't that lying old Jim Hooker standing there by the gate!"

CHAPTER VIII.

JUDGE PEYTON had bequeathed his entire property unconditionally to his wife. But his affairs were found to be greatly in disorder, and his papers in confusion, and although Mrs. Peyton could discover no actual record of the late transaction with Mr. Brant, which had saved her the possession of the homestead, it was evident that he had spent large sums in speculative attempts to maintain the integrity of his estate. That enormous domain, although perfectly unencumbered, had been nevertheless unremunerative, partly through the costs of litigation and partly through the systematic depredations to which its great size and long line of unprotected boundary had subjected it. It had been invaded by squatters and "jumpers," who had sown and reaped crops without discovery; its cattle and wild horses had strayed or been driven beyond its ill-defined and hopeless limits. Against these difficulties the widow felt herself unable and un-

willing to contend, and with the advice of her friends and her lawyer, she concluded to sell the estate, except that portion covered by the Sisters' title, which, with the homestead, had been reconveyed to her by Clarence. She retired with Susy to the house in San Francisco, leaving Clarence to occupy and hold the *casa*, with her servants, for her until order was restored. The Robles Rancho thus became the headquarters of the new owner of the Sisters' title, from which he administered its affairs, visited its incumbencies, overlooked and surveyed its lands, and — occasionally — collected its rents. There were not wanting critics who averred that these were scarcely remunerative, and that the young San Francisco fine gentleman, who was only Hamilton Brant's son, after all, yet who wished to ape the dignity and degree of a large landholder, had made a very foolish bargain. I grieve to say that one of his own tenants, namely, Jim Hooker, in his secret heart inclined to that belief, and looked upon Clarence's speculation as an act of far-seeing and inordinate vanity.

Indeed, the belligerent Jim had partly — and of course darkly — intimated some-

thing of this to Susy in their brief reunion at the *casa* during the few days that followed its successful reoccupation. And Clarence, remembering her older caprices, and her remark on her first recognition of him, was quite surprised at the easy familiarity of her reception of this forgotten companion of their childhood. But he was still more concerned in noticing, for the first time, a singular sympathetic understanding of each other, and an odd similarity of occasional action and expression between them. It was a part of this monstrous peculiarity that neither the sympathy nor the likeness suggested any particular friendship or amity in the pair, but rather a mutual antagonism and suspicion. Mrs. Peyton, coldly polite to Clarence's former *companion*, but condescendingly gracious to his present *tenant* and retainer, did not notice it, preoccupied with the annoyance and pain of Susy's frequent references to the old days of their democratic equality.

"You don't remember, Jim, the time that you painted my face in the wagon, and got me up as an Indian papoose?" she said mischievously.

But Jim, who had no desire to recall his

previous humble position before Mrs. Peyton or Clarence, was only vaguely responsive. Clarence, although joyfully touched at this seeming evidence of Susy's loyalty to the past, nevertheless found himself even more acutely pained at the distress it caused Mrs. Peyton, and was as relieved as she was by Hooker's reticence. For he had seen little of Susy since Peyton's death, and there had been no repetition of their secret interviews. Neither had he, nor she as far as he could judge, noticed the omission. He had been more than usually kind, gentle, and protecting in his manner towards her, with little reference, however, to any response from her, yet he was vaguely conscious of some change in his feelings. He attributed it, when he thought of it at all, to the exciting experiences through which he had passed; to some sentiment of responsibility to his dead friend; and to another secret preoccupation that was always in his mind. He believed it would pass in time. Yet he felt a certain satisfaction that she was no longer able to trouble him, except, of course, when she pained Mrs. Peyton, and then he was half conscious of taking the old attitude of the dead husband in

mediating between them. Yet so great was his inexperience that he believed, with pathetic simplicity of perception, that all this was due to the slow maturing of his love for her, and that he was still able to make her happy. But this was something to be thought of later. Just now Providence seemed to have offered him a vocation and a purpose that his idle adolescence had never known. He did not dream that his capacity for patience was only the slow wasting of his love.

Meantime that more wonderful change and recreation of the Californian landscape, so familiar, yet always so young, had come to the rancho. The league-long terrace that had yellowed, whitened, and wasted for half a year beneath a staring, monotonous sky, now under sailing clouds, flying and broken shafts of light, and sharply defined lines of rain, had taken a faint hue of resurrection. The dust that had muffled the roads and byways, and choked the low oaks that fringed the sunken *cañada*, had long since been laid. The warm, moist breath of the southwest trades had softened the hard, dry lines of the landscape, and restored its color as of a picture over which a damp sponge had

been passed. The broad expanse of plateau before the *casa* glistened and grew dark. The hidden woods of the *cañada*, cleared and strengthened in their solitude, dripped along the trails and hollows that were now transformed into running streams. The distinguishing *madroño* near the entrance to the rancho had changed its crimson summer suit and masqueraded in buff and green.

Yet there were leaden days, when half the prospect seemed to be seen through palisades of rain; when the slight incline between the terraces became a tumultuous cascade, and the surest hoofs slipped on trails of unctuous mud; when cattle were bogged a few yards from the highway, and the crossing of the turnpike road was a dangerous ford. There were days of gale and tempest, when the shriveled stalks of giant oats were stricken like trees, and lay across each other in rigid angles, and a roar as of the sea came up from the writhing treetops in the sunken valley. There were long weary nights of steady downpour, hammering on the red tiles of the *casa*, and drumming on the shingles of the new veranda, which was more terrible to be borne. Alone, but for the ser-

vants, and an occasional storm-stayed tenant from Fair Plains, Clarence might have, at such times, questioned the effect of this seclusion upon his impassioned nature. But he had already been accustomed to monastic seclusion in his boyish life at El Refugio, and he did not reflect that, for that very reason, its indulgences might have been dangerous. From time to time letters reached him from the outer world of San Francisco, — a few pleasant lines from Mrs. Peyton, in answer to his own chronicle of his half stewardship, giving the news of the family, and briefly recounting their movements. She was afraid that Susy's sensitive nature chafed under the restriction of mourning in the gay city, but she trusted to bring her back for a change to Robles when the rains were over. This was a poor substitute for those brief, happy glimpses of the home circle which had so charmed him, but he accepted it stoically. He wandered over the old house, from which the perfume of domesticity seemed to have evaporated, yet, notwithstanding Mrs. Peyton's playful permission, he never intruded upon the sanctity of the boudoir, and kept it jealously locked.

He was sitting in Peyton's business room

one morning, when Incarnacion entered. Clarence had taken a fancy to this Indian, half steward, half vacquero, who had reciprocated it with a certain dog-like fidelity, but also a feline indirectness that was part of his nature. He had been early prepossessed with Clarence through a kinsman at El Refugio, where the young American's generosity had left a romantic record among the common people. He had been pleased to approve of his follies before the knowledge of his profitless and lordly land purchase had commended itself to him as corroborative testimony. "Of true hidalgo blood, mark you," he had said oracularly. "Wherefore was his father sacrificed by mongrels! As to the others, believe me, — bah!"

He stood there, sombrero in hand, murky and confidential, steaming through his soaked *serape* and exhaling a blended odor of equine perspiration and cigarette smoke.

"It was, perhaps, as the master had noticed, a brigand's own day! Bullying, treacherous, and wicked! It blew you off your horse if you so much as lifted your arms and let the wind get inside your *serape;* and as for the mud, — caramba! in fifty

varas your forelegs were like bears, and your hoofs were earthen plasters!"

Clarence knew that Incarnacion had not sought him with mere meteorological information, and patiently awaited further developments. The vacquero went on: —

"But one of the things this beast of a weather did was to wash down the stalks of the grain, and to clear out the trough and hollows between, and to make level the fields, and — look you! to uncover the stones and rubbish and whatever the summer dust had buried. Indeed, it was even as a miracle that José Mendez one day, after the first showers, came upon a silver button from his *calzas*, which he had lost in the early summer. And it was only that morning that, remembering how much and with what fire Don Clarencio had sought the missing boot from the foot of the Señor Peyton when his body was found, he, Incarnacion, had thought he would look for it on the *fulda* of the second terrace. And behold, Mother of God! it was there! Soaked with mud and rain, but the same as when the señor was alive. To the very spur!"

He drew the boot from beneath his *serape* and laid it before Clarence. The young

man instantly recognized it, in spite of its weather-beaten condition and its air of grotesque and drunken inconsistency to the usually trim and correct appearance of Peyton when alive. "It is the same," he said, in a low voice.

"Good!" said Incarnacion. "Now, if Don Clarencio will examine the American spur, he will see — what? A few horse-hairs twisted and caught in the sharp points of the rowel. Good! Is it the hair of the horse that Señor rode? Clearly not; and in truth not. It is too long for the flanks and belly of the horse; it is not the same color as the tail and the mane. How comes it there? It comes from the twisted horse-hair rope of a *riata*, and not from the braided cowhide thongs of the regular lasso of a vacquero. The lasso slips not much, but holds; the *riata* slips much and strangles."

"But Mr. Peyton was not strangled," said Clarence quickly.

"No, for the noose of the *riata* was perhaps large, — who knows? It might have slipped down his arms, pinioned him, and pulled him off. Truly! — such has been known before. Then on the ground it

slipped again, or he perhaps worked it off to his feet where it caught on his spur, and then he was dragged until the boot came off, and behold! he was dead."

This had been Clarence's own theory of the murder, but he had only half confided it to Incarnacion. He silently examined the spur with the accusing horse-hair, and placed it in his desk. Incarnacion continued: —

"There is not a vacquero in the whole rancho who has a horse-hair *riata*. We use the braided cowhide; it is heavier and stronger; it is for the bull and not the man. The horse-hair *riata* comes from over the range — south."

There was a dead silence, broken only by the drumming of the rain upon the roof of the veranda. Incarnacion slightly shrugged his shoulders.

"Don Clarencio does not know the southern county? Francisco Robles, cousin of the 'Sisters,' — he they call 'Pancho,' — comes from the south. Surely when Don Clarencio bought the title he saw Francisco, for he was the steward?"

"I dealt only with the actual owners and through my bankers in San Francisco," returned Clarence abstractedly.

Incarnacion looked through the yellow corners of his murky eyes at his master.

"Pedro Valdez, who was sent away by Señor Peyton, is the foster-brother of Francisco. They were much together. Now that Francisco is rich from the gold Don Clarencio paid for the title, they come not much together. But Pedro is rich, too. Mother of God! He gambles and is a fine gentleman. He holds his head high, — even over the Americanos he gambles with. Truly, they say he can shoot with the best of them. He boasts and swells himself, this Pedro! He says if all the old families were like him, they would drive those western swine back over the mountains again."

Clarence raised his eyes, caught a subtle yellow flash from Incarnacion's, gazed at him suddenly, and rose.

"I don't think I have ever seen him," he said quietly. "Thank you for bringing me the spur. But keep the knowledge of it to yourself, good Nascio, for the present."

Nascio nevertheless still lingered. Perceiving which, Clarence handed him a cigarette and proceeded to light one himself. He knew that the vacquero would reroll his, and that that always deliberate occupation

would cover and be an excuse for further confidence.

"The Señora Peyton does not perhaps meet this Pedro in the society of San Francisco?"

"Surely not. The señora is in mourning and goes not out in society, nor would she probably go anywhere where she would meet a dismissed servant of her husband."

Incarnacion slowly lit his cigarette, and said between the puffs, "And the señorita — she would not meet him?"

"Assuredly not."

"And," continued Incarnacion, throwing down the match and putting his foot on it, "if this boaster, this turkey-cock, says she did, you could put him out like that?"

"Certainly," said Clarence, with an easy confidence he was, however, far from feeling, "if he really *said* it — which I doubt."

"Ah, truly," said Incarnacion; "who knows? It may be another Señorita Silsbee."

"The señora's adopted daughter is called *Miss Peyton*, friend Nascio. You forget yourself," said Clarence quietly.

"Ah, pardon!" said Incarnacion with effusive apology; "but she was born Silsbee.

Everybody knows it; she herself has told it to Pepita. The Señor Peyton bequeathed his estate to the Señora Peyton. He named not the señorita! Eh, what would you? It is the common cackle of the barnyard. But *I* say 'Mees Silsbee.' For look you. There is a Silsbee of Sacramento, the daughter of her aunt, who writes letters to her. Pepita has seen them! And possibly it is only that Mees of whom the brigand Pedro boasts."

"Possibly," said Clarence, "but as far as this rancho is concerned, friend Nascio, thou wilt understand — and I look to thee to make the others understand — that there is no Señorita *Silsbee* here, only the Señorita *Peyton*, the respected daughter of the señora thy mistress!" He spoke with the quaint mingling of familiarity and paternal gravity of the Spanish master — a faculty he had acquired at El Refugio in a like vicarious position, and which never failed as a sign of authority. "And now," he added gravely, "get out of this, friend, with God's blessing, and see that thou remember-est what I told thee."

The retainer, with equal gravity, stepped backwards, saluted with his sombrero until the stiff brim scraped the floor, and then solemnly withdrew.

Left to himself, Clarence remained for an instant silent and thoughtful before the oven-like hearth. So! everybody knew Susy's real relations to the Peytons, and everybody but Mrs. Peyton, perhaps, knew that she was secretly corresponding with some one of her own family. In other circumstances he might have found some excuse for this assertion of her independence and love of her kindred, but in her attitude towards Mrs. Peyton it seemed monstrous. It appeared impossible that Mrs. Peyton should not have heard of it, or suspected the young girl's disaffection. Perhaps she had, — it was another burden laid upon her shoulders, — but the proud woman had kept it to herself. A film of moisture came across his eyes. I fear he thought less of the suggestion of Susy's secret meeting with Pedro, or Incarnacion's implied suspicions that Pedro was concerned in Peyton's death, than of this sentimental possibility. He knew that Pedro had been hated by the others on account of his position; he knew the instinctive jealousies of the race and their predisposition to extravagant misconstruction. From what he had gathered, and particularly from the voices he had over-

heard on the Fair Plains Road, it seemed to him that Pedro was more capable of mercenary intrigue than physical revenge. He was not aware of the irrevocable affront put upon Pedro by Peyton, and he had consequently attached no importance to Peyton's own half-scornful intimation of the only kind of retaliation that Pedro would be likely to take. The unsuccessful attempt upon himself he had always thought might have been an accident, or if it was really a premeditated assault, it might have been intended actually for *himself* and not Peyton, as he had first thought, and his old friend had suffered for *him*, through some mistake of the assailant. The purpose, which alone seemed wanting, might have been to remove Clarence as a possible witness who had overheard their conspiracy — how much of it they did not know — on the Fair Plains Road that night. The only clue he held to the murderer in the spur locked in his desk, merely led him beyond the confines of the rancho, but definitely nowhere else. It was, however, some relief to know that the crime was not committed by one of Peyton's retainers, nor the outcome of domestic treachery.

After some consideration he resolved to seek Jim Hooker, who might be possessed of some information respecting Susy's relations, either from the young girl's own confidences or from Jim's personal knowledge of the old frontier families. From a sense of loyalty to Susy and Mrs. Peyton, he had never alluded to the subject before him, but since the young girl's own indiscretion had made it a matter of common report, however distasteful it was to his own feelings, he felt he could not plead the sense of delicacy for her. He had great hopes in what he had always believed was only her exaggeration of fact as well as feeling. And he had an instinctive reliance on her fellow *poseur's* ability to detect it. A few days later, when he found he could safely leave the rancho alone, he rode to Fair Plains.

The floods were out along the turnpike road, and even seemed to have increased since his last journey. The face of the landscape had changed again. One of the lower terraces had become a wild mere of sedge and reeds. The dry and dusty bed of a forgotten brook had reappeared, a full-banked river, crossing the turnpike and compelling a long détour before the traveler could ford

it. But as he approached the Hopkins farm and the opposite clearing and cabin of Jim Hooker, he was quite unprepared for a still more remarkable transformation. The cabin, a three-roomed structure, and its cattle-shed had entirely disappeared! There were no traces or signs of inundation. The land lay on a gentle acclivity above the farm and secure from the effects of the flood, and a part of the ploughed and cleared land around the site of the cabin showed no evidence of overflow on its black, upturned soil. But the house was gone! Only a few timbers too heavy to be removed, the blighting erasions of a few months of occupation, and the dull, blackened area of the site itself were to be seen. The fence alone was intact.

Clarence halted before it, perplexed and astonished. Scarcely two weeks had elapsed since he had last visited it and sat beneath its roof with Jim, and already its few ruins had taken upon themselves the look of years of abandonment and decay. The wild land seemed to have thrown off its yoke of cultivation in a night, and nature rioted again with all its primal forces over the freed soil. Wild oats and mustard were springing al-

ready in the broken furrows, and lank vines were slimily spreading over a few scattered but still unseasoned and sappy shingles. Some battered tin cans and fragments of old clothing looked as remote as if they had been relics of the earliest immigration.

Clarence turned inquiringly towards the Hopkins farmhouse across the road. His arrival, however, had already been noticed, as the door of the kitchen opened in an anticipatory fashion, and he could see the slight figure of Phœbe Hopkins in the doorway, backed by the overlooking heads and shoulders of her parents. The face of the young girl was pale and drawn with anxiety, at which Clarence's simple astonishment took a shade of concern.

"I am looking for Mr. Hooker," he said uneasily. "And I don't seem to be able to find either him or his house."

"And you don't know what 's gone of him?" said the girl quickly.

"No; I have n't seen him for two weeks."

"There, I told you so!" said the girl, turning nervously to her parents. "I knew it. He has n't seen him for two weeks." Then, looking almost tearfully at Clarence's face, she said, "No more have we."

"But," said Clarence impatiently, "something must have happened. Where is his house?"

"Taken away by them jumpers," interrupted the old farmer; "a lot of roughs that pulled it down and carted it off in a jiffy before our very eyes without answerin' a civil question to me or her. But he was n't there, nor before, nor since."

"No," added the old woman, with flashing eyes, "or he 'd let 'em have what ther' was in his six-shooters."

"No, he would n't, mother," said the girl impatiently, "he 'd *changed*, and was agin all them ideas of force and riotin'. He was for peace and law all the time. Why, the day before we missed him he was tellin' me California never would be decent until people obeyed the laws and the titles were settled. And for that reason, because he would n't fight agin the law, or without the consent of the law, they 've killed him, or kidnapped him away."

The girl's lips quivered, and her small brown hands twisted the edges of her blue checked apron. Although this new picture of Jim's peacefulness was as astounding and unsatisfactory as his own disappearance,

there was no doubt of the sincerity of poor Phœbe's impression.

In vain did Clarence point out to them there must be some mistake; that the trespassers — the so-called jumpers — really belonged to the same party as Hooker, and would have no reason to dispossess him; that, in fact, they were all *his*, Clarence's, tenants. In vain he assured them of Hooker's perfect security in possession; that he could have driven the intruders away by the simple exhibition of his lease, or that he could have even called a constable from the town of Fair Plains to protect him from mere lawlessness. In vain did he assure them of his intention to find his missing friend, and reinstate him at any cost. The conviction that the unfortunate young man had been foully dealt with was fixed in the minds of the two women. For a moment Clarence himself was staggered by it.

"You see," said the young girl, with a kindling face, "the day before he came back from Robles, ther' were some queer men hangin' round his cabin, but as they were the same kind that went off with him the day the Sisters' title was confirmed, we thought nothing of it. But when he came

back from you he seemed worried and anxious, and was n't a bit like himself. We thought perhaps he 'd got into some trouble there, or been disappointed. He had n't, had he, Mr. Brant?" continued Phœbe, with an appealing look.

"By no means," said Clarence warmly. "On the contrary, he was able to do his friends good service there, and was successful in what he attempted. Mrs. Peyton was very grateful. Of course he told you what had happened, and what he did for us," continued Clarence, with a smile.

He had already amused himself on the way with a fanciful conception of the exaggerated account Jim had given of his exploits. But the bewildered girl shook her head.

"No, he did n't tell us *anything*."

Clarence was really alarmed. This unprecedented abstention of Hooker's was portentous.

"He did n't say anything but what I told you about law and order," she went on; "but that same night we heard a good deal of talking and shouting in the cabin and around it. And the next day he was talking with father, and wanting to know how

he kept his land without trouble from outsiders."

"And I said," broke in Hopkins, "that I guessed folks did n't bother a man with women folks around, and that I kalkilated that *I* was n't quite as notorious for fightin' as he was."

"And he said," also interrupted Mrs. Hopkins, "and quite in his nat'ral way, too, — gloomy like, you remember, Cyrus," appealingly to her husband, — "that that was his curse."

The smile that flickered around Clarence's mouth faded, however, as he caught sight of Phœbe's pleading, interrogating eyes. It was really too bad. Whatever change had come over the rascal it was too evident that his previous belligerent personality had had its full effect upon the simple girl, and that, hereafter, one pair of honest eyes would be wistfully following him.

Perplexed and indignant, Clarence again closely questioned her as to the personnel of the trespassing party who had been seen once or twice since passing over the field. He had at last elicited enough information to identify one of them as Gilroy, the leader of the party that had invaded Robles

Rancho. His cheek flushed. Even if they had wished to take a theatrical and momentary revenge on Hooker for the passing treachery to them which they had just discovered, although such retaliation was only transitory, and they could not hold the land, it was an insult to Clarence himself, whose tenant Jim was, and subversive of all their legally acquired rights. He would confront this Gilroy at once; his half-wild encampment was only a few miles away, just over the boundaries of the Robles estate. Without stating his intention, he took leave of the Hopkins family with the cheerful assurance that he would probably return with some news of Hooker, and rode away.

The trail became more indistinct and unfrequented as it diverged from the main road, and presently lost itself in the slope towards the east. The horizon grew larger: there were faint bluish lines upon it which he knew were distant mountains; beyond this a still fainter white line — the Sierran snows. Presently he intersected a trail running south, and remarked that it crossed the highway behind him, where he had once met the two mysterious horsemen. They had evidently reached the terrace through

the wild oats by that trail. A little farther on were a few groups of sheds and canvas tents in a bare and open space, with scattered cattle and horsemen, exactly like an encampment, or the gathering of a country fair. As Clarence rode down towards them he could see that his approach was instantly observed, and that a simultaneous movement was made as if to anticipate him. For the first time he realized the possible consequences of his visit, single-handed, but it was too late to retrace his steps. With a glance at his holster, he rode boldly forward to the nearest shed. A dozen men hovered near him, but something in his quiet, determined manner held them aloof. Gilroy was on the threshold in his shirt-sleeves. A single look showed him that Clarence was alone, and with a careless gesture of his hand he warned away his own followers.

"You 've got a sort of easy way of droppin' in whar you ain't invited, Brant," he said with a grim smile, which was not, however, without a certain air of approval. "Got it from your father, did n't you?"

"I don't know, but I don't believe *he* ever thought it necessary to warn twenty

men of the approach of one," replied Clarence, in the same tone. "I had no time to stand on ceremony, for I have just come from Hooker's quarter section at Fair Plains."

Gilroy smiled again, and gazed abstractedly at the sky.

"You know as well as I do," said Clarence, controlling his voice with an effort, "that what you have done there will have to be undone, if you wish to hold even those lawless men of yours together, or keep yourself and them from being run into the brush like highwaymen. I 've no fear for that. Neither do I care to know what was your motive in doing it; but I can only tell you that if it was retaliation, I alone was and still am responsible for Hooker's action at the rancho. I came here to know just what you have done with him, and, if necessary, to take his place."

"You 're just a little too previous in your talk, I reckon, Brant," returned Gilroy lazily, "and as to legality, I reckon we stand on the same level with yourself, just here. Beginnin' with what you came for: as we don't know where your Jim Hooker is, and as we ain't done anythin' to *him*, we

don't exackly see what we could do with *you* in his place. Ez to our motives, — well, we 've got a good deal to say about *that*. We reckoned that he was n't exackly the kind of man we wanted for a neighbor. His pow'ful fightin' style did n't suit us peaceful folks, and we thought it rather worked agin this new 'law and order' racket to have such a man about, to say nuthin' of it prejudicin' quiet settlers. He had too many revolvers for one man to keep his eye on, and was altogether too much steeped in blood, so to speak, for ordinary washin' and domestic purposes! His hull get up was too deathlike and clammy; so we persuaded him to leave. We just went there, all of us, and exhorted him. We stayed round there two days and nights, takin' turns, talkin' with him, nuthin' more, only selecting subjects in his own style to please him, until he left! And then, as we did n't see any use for his house there, we took it away. Them 's the cold facts, Brant," he added, with a certain convincing indifference that left no room for doubt, "and you can stand by 'em. Now, workin' back to the first principle you laid down, — that we 'll have to *undo* what we 've *done*, — we don't agree with you,

for we 've taken a leaf outer your own book. We 've got it here in black and white. We 've got a bill o' sale of Hooker's house and possession, and we 're on the land in place of him, — *as your tenants.*" He re-entered the shanty, took a piece of paper from a soap-box on the shelf, and held it out to Clarence. "Here it is. It 's a fair and square deal, Brant. We gave him, as it says here, a hundred dollars for it! No humbuggin', but the hard cash, by Jiminy! *And he took the money.*"

The ring of truth in the man's voice was as unmistakable as the signature in Jim's own hand. Hooker had sold out! Clarence turned hastily away.

"We don't know where he went," continued Gilroy grimly, "but I reckon you ain't over anxious to see him *now*. And I kin tell ye something to ease your mind, — he did n't require much persuadin'. And I kin tell ye another, if ye ain't above takin' advice from folks that don't pertend to give it," he added, with the same curious look of interest in his face. "You 've done well to get shut of him, and if you got shut of a few more of his kind that you trust to, you 'd do better."

As if to avoid noticing any angry reply from the young man, he reëntered the cabin and shut the door behind him. Clarence felt the uselessness of further parley, and rode away.

But Gilroy's Parthian arrow rankled as he rode. He was not greatly shocked at Jim's defection, for he was always fully conscious of his vanity and weakness; but he was by no means certain that Jim's extravagance and braggadocio, which he had found only amusing and, perhaps, even pathetic, might not be as provocative and prejudicial to others as Gilroy had said. But, like all sympathetic and unselfish natures, he sought to find some excuse for his old companion's weakness in his own mistaken judgment. He had no business to bring poor Jim on the land, to subject his singular temperament to the temptations of such a life and such surroundings; he should never have made use of his services at the rancho. He had done him harm rather than good in his ill-advised, and, perhaps, *selfish* attempts to help him. I have said that Gilroy's parting warning rankled in his breast, but not ignobly. It wounded the surface of his sensitive nature, but could not taint or cor-

rupt the pure, wholesome blood of the gentleman beneath it. For in Gilroy's warning he saw only his own shortcomings. A strange fatality had marked his friendships. He had been no help to Jim; he had brought no happiness to Susy or Mrs. Peyton, whose disagreement his visit seemed to have accented. Thinking over the mysterious attack upon himself, it now seemed to him possible that, in some obscure way, his presence at the rancho had precipitated the more serious attack on Peyton. If, as it had been said, there was some curse upon his inheritance from his father, he seemed to have made others share it with him. He was riding onward abstractedly, with his head sunk on his breast and his eyes fixed upon some vague point between his horse's sensitive ears, when a sudden, intelligent, forward pricking of them startled him, and an apparition arose from the plain before him that seemed to sweep all other sense away.

It was the figure of a handsome young horseman as abstracted as himself, but evidently on better terms with his own personality. He was dark haired, sallow cheeked, and blue eyed, — the type of the old Span-

ish Californian. A burnt-out cigarette was in his mouth, and he was riding a roan mustang with the lazy grace of his race. But what arrested Clarence's attention more than his picturesque person was the narrow, flexible, long coil of gray horse-hair *riata* which hung from his saddle-bow, but whose knotted and silver-beaded terminating lash he was swirling idly in his narrow brown hand. Clarence knew and instantly recognized it as the ordinary fanciful appendage of a gentleman rider, used for tethering his horse on lonely plains, and always made the object of the most lavish expenditure of decoration and artistic skill. But he was as suddenly filled with a blind, unreasoning sense of repulsion and fury, and lifted his eyes to the man as he approached. What the stranger saw in Clarence's blazing eyes no one but himself knew, for his own became fixed and staring; his sallow cheeks grew lanker and livid; his careless, jaunty bearing stiffened into rigidity, and swerving his horse to one side he suddenly passed Clarence at a furious gallop. The young American wheeled quickly, and for an instant his knees convulsively gripped the flanks of his horse to follow. But the

next moment he recalled himself, and with an effort began to collect his thoughts. What was he intending to do, and for what reason! He had met hundreds of such horsemen before, and caparisoned and accoutred like this, even to the *riata*. And he certainly was not dressed like either of the mysterious horsemen whom he had overheard that moonlight evening. He looked back; the stranger had already slackened his pace, and was slowly disappearing. Clarence turned and rode on his way.

CHAPTER IX.

WITHOUT disclosing the full extent of Jim's defection and desertion, Clarence was able to truthfully assure the Hopkins family of his personal safety, and to promise that he would continue his quest, and send them further news of the absentee. He believed it would be found that Jim had been called away on some important business, but that not daring to leave his new shanty exposed and temptingly unprotected, he had made a virtue of necessity by selling it to his neighbors, intending to build a better house on its site after his return. Having comforted Phœbe, and impulsively conceived further plans for restoring Jim to her, — happily without any recurrence of his previous doubts as to his own efficacy as a special Providence, — he returned to the rancho. If he thought again of Jim's defection and Gilroy's warning, it was only to strengthen himself to a clearer perception of his unselfish duty and singleness of purpose. He

would give up brooding, apply himself more practically to the management of the property, carry out his plans for the foundation of a Landlords' Protective League for the southern counties, become a candidate for the Legislature, and, in brief, try to fill Peyton's place in the county as he had at the rancho. He would endeavor to become better acquainted with the half-breed laborers on the estate and avoid the friction between them and the Americans; he was conscious that he had not made that use of his early familiarity with their ways and language which he might have done. If, occasionally, the figure of the young Spaniard whom he had met on the lonely road obtruded itself on him, it was always with the instinctive premonition that he would meet him again, and the mystery of the sudden repulsion be in some way explained. Thus Clarence! But the momentary impulse that had driven him to Fair Plains, the eagerness to set his mind at rest regarding Susy and her relatives, he had utterly forgotten.

Howbeit some of the energy and enthusiasm that he breathed into these various essays made their impression. He succeeded in forming the Landlords' League; under a

commission suggested by him the straggling boundaries of Robles and the adjacent claims were resurveyed, defined, and mutually protected; even the lawless Gilroy, from extending an amused toleration to the young administrator, grew to recognize and accept him; the *peons* and vacqueros began to have faith in a man who acknowledged them sufficiently to rebuild the ruined Mission Chapel on the estate, and save them the long pilgrimage to Santa Inez on Sundays and saints' days; the San Francisco priest imported from Clarence's old college at San José, and an habitual guest at Clarence's hospitable board, was grateful enough to fill his flock with loyalty to the young *padron*.

He had returned from a long drive one afternoon, and had just thrown himself into an easy-chair with the comfortable consciousness of a rest fairly earned. The dull embers of a fire occasionally glowed in the oven-like hearth, although the open casement of a window let in the soft breath of the south-west trades. The angelus had just rung from the restored chapel, and, mellowed by distance, seemed to Clarence to lend that repose to the wind-swept landscape that it had always lacked.

Suddenly his quick ear detected the sound of wheels in the ruts of the carriage way. Usually his visitors to the *casa* came on horseback, and carts and wagons used only the lower road. As the sound approached nearer, an odd fancy filled his heart with unaccountable pleasure. Could it be Mrs. Peyton making an unexpected visit to the rancho? He held his breath. The vehicle was now rolling on into the *patio*. The clatter of hoofs and a halt were followed by the accents of women's voices. One seemed familiar. He rose quickly, as light footsteps ran along the corridor, and then the door opened impetuously to the laughing face of Susy!

He came towards her hastily, yet with only the simple impulse of astonishment. He had no thought of kissing her, but as he approached, she threw her charming head archly to one side, with a mischievous knitting of her brows and a significant gesture towards the passage, that indicated the proximity of a stranger and the possibility of interruption.

"Hush! Mrs. McClosky's here," she whispered.

"Mrs. McClosky?" repeated Clarence vaguely.

"Yes, of course," impatiently. "My Aunt Jane. Silly! We just cut away down here to surprise you. Aunty 's never seen the place, and here was a good chance."

"And your mother — Mrs. Peyton? Has she — does she?" — stammered Clarence.

"Has she — does she?" mimicked Susy, with increasing impatience. "Why, of course she *does n't* know anything about it. She thinks I 'm visiting Mary Rogers at Oakland. And I am — *afterwards*," she laughed. "I just wrote to Aunt Jane to meet me at Alameda, and we took the stage to Santa Inez and drove on here in a buggy. Was n't it real fun? Tell me, Clarence! You don't say anything! Tell me — was n't it real fun?"

This was all so like her old, childlike, charming, irresponsible self, that Clarence, troubled and bewildered as he was, took her hands and drew her like a child towards him.

"Of course," she went on, yet stopping to smell a rosebud in his buttonhole, "I have a perfect right to come to my own home, goodness knows! and if I bring my own aunt, a married woman, with me, — although," loftily, "there may be a young

unmarried gentleman alone there, — still I fail to see any impropriety in it!"

He was still holding her; but in that instant her manner had completely changed again; the old Susy seemed to have slipped away and evaded him, and he was retaining only a conscious actress in his arms.

"Release me, Mr. Brant, please," she said, with a languid affected glance behind her; "we are not alone."

Then, as the rustling of a skirt sounded nearer in the passage, she seemed to change back to her old self once more, and with a lightning flash of significance whispered, —

"She knows everything!"

To add to Clarence's confusion, the woman who entered cast a quick glance of playful meaning on the separating youthful pair. She was an ineffective blonde with a certain beauty that seemed to be gradually succumbing to the ravages of paint and powder rather than years; her dress appeared to have suffered from an equally unwise excess of ornamentation and trimming, and she gave the general impression of having been intended for exhibition in almost any other light than the one in which she happened to be. There were two or three mud-

stains on the laces of her sleeve and underskirt that were obtrusively incongruous. Her voice, which had, however, a ring of honest intention in it, was somewhat overstrained, and evidently had not yet adjusted itself to the low-ceilinged, conventual-like building.

"There, children, don't mind me! I know I 'm not on in this scene, but I got nervous waiting there, in what you call the 'sallon,' with only those Greaser servants staring round me in a circle, like a regular chorus. My! but it 's anteek here — regular anteek — Spanish." Then, with a glance at Clarence, "So this is Clarence Brant, — your Clarence? Interduce me, Susy."

In his confusion of indignation, pain, and even a certain conception of the grim ludicrousness of the situation, Clarence grasped despairingly at the single sentence of Susy's. "In my own home." Surely, at least, it was *her own home*, and as he was only the business agent of her adopted mother, he had no right to dictate to her under what circumstances she should return to it, or whom she should introduce there. In her independence and caprice Susy might easily have gone elsewhere with this astounding

relative, and would Mrs. Peyton like it better? Clinging to this idea, his instinct of hospitality asserted itself. He welcomed Mrs. McClosky with nervous effusion: —

"I am only Mrs. Peyton's major domo here, but any guest of her *daughter's* is welcome."

"Yes," said Mrs. McClosky, with ostentatious archness, "I reckon Susy and I understand your position here, and you 've got a good berth of it. But we won't trouble you much on Mrs. Peyton's account, will we, Susy? And now she and me will just take a look around the shanty, — it is real old Spanish anteek, ain't it? — and sorter take stock of it, and you young folks will have to tear yourselves apart for a while, and play propriety before me. You 've got to be on your good behavior while I 'm here, I can tell you! I 'm a heavy old 'doo-anna.' Ain't I, Susy? School-ma'ms and mother superiors ain't in the game with *me* for discipline."

She threw her arms around the young girl's waist and drew her towards her affectionately, an action that slightly precipitated some powder upon the black dress of her niece. Susy glanced mischievously at Clar-

ence, but withdrew her eyes presently to let them rest with unmistakable appreciation and admiration on her relative. A pang shot through Clarence's breast. He had never seen her look in that way at Mrs. Peyton. Yet here was this stranger, provincial, overdressed, and extravagant, whose vulgarity was only made tolerable through her good humor, who had awakened that interest which the refined Mrs. Peyton had never yet been able to touch. As Mrs. McClosky swept out of the room with Susy he turned away with a sinking heart.

Yet it was necessary that the Spanish house servants should not suspect this treason to their mistress, and Clarence stopped their childish curiosity about the stranger with a careless and easy acceptance of Susy's sudden visit in the light of an ordinary occurrence, and with a familiarity towards Mrs. McClosky which became the more distasteful to him in proportion as he saw that it was evidently agreeable to her. But, easily responsive, she became speedily confidential. Without a single question from himself, or a contributing remark from Susy, in half an hour she had told him her whole history. How, as Jane Silsbee, an elder

sister of Susy's mother, she had early eloped from the paternal home in Kansas with McClosky, a strolling actor. How she had married him and gone on the stage under his stage name, effectively preventing any recognition by her family. How, coming to California, where her husband had become manager of the theatre at Sacramento, she was indignant to find that her only surviving relation, a sister-in-law, living in the same place, had for a money consideration given up all claim to the orphaned Susy, and how she had resolved to find out "if the poor child was happy." How she succeeded in finding out that she was not happy. How she wrote to her, and even met her secretly at San Francisco and Oakland, and how she had undertaken this journey partly for "a lark," and partly to see Clarence and the property. There was no doubt of the speaker's sincerity; with this outrageous candor there was an equal obliviousness of any indelicacy in her conduct towards Mrs. Peyton that seemed hopeless. Yet he must talk plainly to her; he must say to her what he could not say to Susy; upon *her* Mrs. Peyton's happiness — he believed he was thinking of Susy's also — depended. He

must take the first opportunity of speaking to her alone.

That opportunity came sooner than he had expected. After dinner, Mrs. McClosky turned to Susy, and playfully telling her that she had "to talk business" with Mr. Brant, bade her go to the salon and await her. When the young girl left the room, she looked at Clarence, and, with that assumption of curtness with which coarse but kindly natures believe they overcome the difficulty of delicate subjects, said abruptly: —

"Well, young man, now what 's all this between you and Susy? I 'm looking after her interests — same as if she was my own girl. If you 've got anything to say, now 's your time. And don't you shilly-shally too long over it, either, for you might as well know that a girl like that can have her pick and choice, and be beholden to no one; and when she don't care to choose, there 's me and my husband ready to do for her all the same. We might n't be able to do the anteek Spanish Squire, but we 've got our own line of business, and it 's a comfortable one."

To have this said to him under the roof

of Mrs. Peyton, from whom, in his sensitiveness, he had thus far jealously guarded his own secret, was even more than Clarence's gentleness could stand, and fixed his wavering resolution.

"I don't think we quite understand each other, Mrs. McClosky," he said coldly, but with glittering eyes. "I have certainly something to say to you; if it is not on a subject as pleasant as the one you propose, it is, nevertheless, one that I think you and I are more competent to discuss together."

Then, with quiet but unrelenting directness, he pointed out to her that Susy was a legally adopted daughter of Mrs. Peyton, and, as a minor, utterly under her control; that Mrs. Peyton had no knowledge of any opposing relatives; and that Susy had not only concealed the fact from her, but that he was satisfied that Mrs. Peyton did not even know of Susy's discontent and alienation; that she had tenderly and carefully brought up the helpless orphan as her own child, and even if she had not gained her affection was at least entitled to her obedience and respect; that while Susy's girlish caprice and inexperience excused *her* conduct, Mrs. Peyton and her friends would

have a right to expect more consideration from a person of Mrs. McClosky's maturer judgment. That for these reasons, and as the friend of Mrs. Peyton, whom he could alone recognize as Susy's guardian and the arbiter of her affections, he must decline to discuss the young girl with any reference to himself or his own intentions.

An unmistakable flush asserted itself under the lady's powder.

"Suit yourself, young man, suit yourself," she said, with equally direct resentment and antagonism; "only mebbee you 'll let me tell you that Jim McClosky ain't no fool, and mebbee knows what lawyers think of an arrangement with a sister-in-law that leaves a real sister out! Mebbee that 's a 'Sister's title' you ain't thought of, Mr. Brant! And mebbee you 'll find out that your chance o' gettin' Mrs. Peyton's consent ain't as safe to gamble on as you reckon it is. And mebbee, what 's more to the purpose, if you *did* get it, it might not be just the trump card to fetch Susy with! And to wind up, Mr. Brant, when you *do* have to come down to the bed-rock and me and Jim McClosky, you may find out that him and me have discovered a bet-

ter match for Susy than the son of old Ham Brant, who is trying to play the Spanish grandee off his father's money on a couple of women. And we may n't have to go far to do it — or to get *the real thing*, Mr. Brant!"

Too heartsick and disgusted to even notice the slur upon himself or the import of her last words, Clarence only rose and bowed as she jumped up from the table. But as she reached the door he said, half appealingly: —

"Whatever are your other intentions, Mrs. McClosky, as we are both Susy's guests, I beg you will say nothing of this to her while we are here, and particularly that you will not allow her to think for a moment that I have discussed *my* relations to her with anybody."

She flung herself out of the door without a reply; but on entering the dark low-ceilinged drawing-room she was surprised to find that Susy was not there. She was consequently obliged to return to the veranda, where Clarence had withdrawn, and to somewhat ostentatiously demand of the servants that Susy should be sent to her room at once. But the young girl was not in her

own room, and was apparently nowhere to be found. Clarence, who had now fully determined as a last resource to make a direct appeal to Susy herself, listened to this fruitless search with some concern. She could not have gone out in the rain, which was again falling. She might be hiding somewhere to avoid a recurrence of the scene she had perhaps partly overheard. He turned into the corridor that led to Mrs. Peyton's boudoir. As he knew that it was locked, he was surprised to see by the dim light of the hanging lamp that a duplicate key to the one in his desk was in the lock. It must be Susy's, and the young girl had probably taken refuge there. He knocked gently. There was a rustle in the room and the sound of a chair being moved, but no reply. Impelled by a sudden instinct he opened the door, and was met by a cool current of air from some open window. At the same moment the figure of Susy approached him from the semi-darkness of the interior.

"I did not know you were here," said Clarence, much relieved, he knew not why, "but I am glad, for I wanted to speak with you alone for a few moments."

She did not reply, but he drew a match from his pocket and lit the two candles which he knew stood on the table. The wick of one was still warm, as if it had been recently extinguished. As the light slowly radiated, he could see that she was regarding him with an air of affected unconcern, but a somewhat heightened color. It was like her, and not inconsistent with his idea that she had come there to avoid an after scene with Mrs. McClosky or himself, or perhaps both. The room was not disarranged in any way. The window that was opened was the casement of the deep embrasured one in the rear wall, and the light curtain before it still swayed occasionally in the night wind.

"I 'm afraid I had a row with your aunt, Susy," he began lightly, in his old familiar way; "but I had to tell her I did n't think her conduct to Mrs. Peyton was exactly the square thing towards one who had been as devoted to you as she has been."

"Oh, for goodness' sake, don't go over all that again," said Susy impatiently. "I 've had enough of it."

Clarence flushed, but recovered himself.

"Then you overheard what I said, and know what I think," he said calmly.

"I knew it *before*," said the young girl, with a slight supercilious toss of the head, and yet a certain abstraction of manner as she went to the window and closed it. "Anybody could see it! I know you always wanted me to stay here with Mrs. Peyton, and be coddled and monitored and catechised and shut up away from any one, until *you* had been coddled and monitored and catechised by somebody else sufficiently to suit her ideas of your being a fit husband for me. I told aunty it was no use our coming here to — to" —

"To do what?" asked Clarence.

"To put some spirit into you," said the young girl, turning upon him sharply; "to keep you from being tied to that woman's apron-strings. To keep her from making a slave of you as she would of me. But it is of no use. Mary Rogers was right when she said you had no wish to please anybody but Mrs. Peyton, and no eyes for anybody but her. And if it had n't been too ridiculous, considering her age and yours, she 'd say you were dead in love with her."

For an instant Clarence felt the blood

rush to his face and then sink away, leaving him pale and cold. The room, which had seemed to whirl around him, and then fade away, returned with appalling distinctness, — the distinctness of memory, — and a vision of the first day that he had seen Mrs. Peyton sitting there, as he seemed to see her now. For the first time there flashed upon him the conviction that the young girl had spoken the truth, and had brusquely brushed the veil from his foolish eyes. He *was* in love with Mrs. Peyton! That was what his doubts and hesitation regarding Susy meant. That alone was the source, secret, and limit of his vague ambition.

But with the conviction came a singular calm. In the last few moments he seemed to have grown older, to have loosed the bonds of old companionship with Susy, and the later impression she had given him of her mature knowledge, and moved on far beyond her years and experience. And it was with an authority that was half paternal, and in a voice he himself scarcely recognized, that he said: —

"If I did not know you were prejudiced by a foolish and indiscreet woman, I should believe that you were trying to insult me as

you have your adopted mother, and would save you the pain of doing both in *her* house by leaving it now and forever. But because I believe you are controlled against your best instinct by that woman, I shall remain here with you to frustrate her as best I can, or until I am able to lay everything before Mrs. Peyton except the foolish speech you have just made."

The young girl laughed. "Why not *that* one too, while you 're about it? See what she 'll say."

"I shall tell her," continued Clarence calmly, "only what *you* yourself have made it necessary for me to tell her to save you from folly and disgrace, and only enough to spare her the mortification of hearing it first from her own servants."

"Hearing *what* from her own servants? What do you mean? How dare you?" demanded the young girl sharply.

She was quite real in her anxiety now, although her attitude of virtuous indignation struck him as being like all her emotional expression, namely, acting.

"I mean that the servants know of your correspondence with Mrs. McClosky, and that she claims to be your aunt," returned

Clarence. "They know that you confided to Pepita. They believe that either Mrs. McClosky or you have seen" —

He had stopped suddenly. He was about to say that the servants (particularly Incarnacion) knew that Pedro had boasted of having met Susy, when, for the first time, the tremendous significance of what he had hitherto considered as merely an idle falsehood flashed upon him.

"Seen whom?" repeated Susy in a higher voice, impatiently stamping her foot.

Clarence looked at her, and in her excited, questioning face saw a confirmation of his still half-formed suspicions. In his own abrupt pause and knitted eyebrows she must have read his thoughts also. Their eyes met. Her violet pupils dilated, trembled, and then quickly shifted as she suddenly stiffened into an attitude of scornful indifference, almost grotesque in its unreality. His eyes slowly turned to the window, the door, the candles on the table and the chair before it, and then came back to her face again. Then he drew a deep breath.

"I give no heed to the idle gossip of servants, Susy," he said slowly. "I have no belief that you have ever contemplated

anything worse than an act of girlish folly, or the gratification of a passing caprice. Neither do I want to appeal to you or frighten you, but I must tell you now, that I know certain facts that might make such a simple act of folly monstrous, inconceivable in *you*, and almost accessory to a crime! I can tell you no more. But so satisfied am I of such a possibility, that I shall not scruple to take any means — the strongest — to prevent even the remotest chance of it. Your aunt has been looking for you; you had better go to her now. I will close the room and lock the door. Meantime, I should advise you not to sit so near an open window with a candle at night in this locality. Even if it might not be dangerous for you, it might be fatal to the foolish creatures it might attract."

He took the key from the door as he held it open for her to pass out. She uttered a shrill little laugh, like a nervous, mischievous child, and, slipping out of her previous artificial attitude as if it had been a mantle, ran out of the room.

CHAPTER X.

As Susy's footsteps died away, Clarence closed the door, walked to the window, and examined it closely. The bars had been restored since he had wrenched them off to give ingress to the family on the day of recapture. He glanced around the room; nothing seemed to have been disturbed. Nevertheless he was uneasy. The suspicions of a frank, trustful nature when once aroused are apt to be more general and far-reaching than the specific distrusts of the disingenuous, for they imply the overthrow of a whole principle and not a mere detail. Clarence's conviction that Susy had seen Pedro recently since his dismissal led him into the wildest surmises of her motives. It was possible that without her having reason to suspect Pedro's greater crime, he might have confided to her his intention of reclaiming the property and installing her as the mistress and chatelaine of the rancho. The idea was one that might have appealed to

Susy's theatrical imagination. He recalled Mrs. McClosky's sneer at his own pretensions and her vague threats of a rival of more lineal descent. The possible infidelity of Susy to himself touched him lightly when the first surprise was over; indeed, it scarcely could be called infidelity, if she knew and believed Mary Rogers's discovery; and the conviction that he and she had really never loved each other now enabled him, as he believed, to look at her conduct dispassionately. Yet it was her treachery to Mrs. Peyton and not to himself that impressed him most, and perhaps made him equally unjust, through his affections.

He extinguished the candles, partly from some vague precautions he could not explain, and partly to think over his fears in the abstraction and obscurity of the semi-darkness. The higher windows suffused a faint light on the ceiling, and, assisted by the dark lantern-like glow cast on the opposite wall by the tunnel of the embrasured window, the familiar outlines of the room and its furniture came back to him. Somewhat in this fashion also, in the obscurity and quiet, came back to him the events he had overlooked and forgotten. He recalled now

some gossip of the servants, and hints dropped by Susy of a violent quarrel between Peyton and Pedro, which resulted in Pedro's dismissal, but which now seemed clearly attributable to some graver cause than inattention and insolence. He recalled Mary Rogers's playful pleasantries with Susy about Pedro, and Susy's mysterious air, which he had hitherto regarded only as part of her exaggeration. He remembered Mrs. Peyton's unwarrantable uneasiness about Susy, which he had either overlooked or referred entirely to himself; she must have suspected something. To his quickened imagination, in this ruin of his faith and trust, he believed that Hooker's defection was either part of the conspiracy, or that he had run away to avoid being implicated with Susy in its discovery. This, too, was the significance of Gilroy's parting warning. He and Mrs. Peyton alone had been blind and confiding in the midst of this treachery, and even *he* had been blind to his own real affections.

The wind had risen again, and the faint light on the opposite wall grew tremulous and shifting with the movement of the foliage without. But presently the glow be-

came quite obliterated, as if by the intervention of some opaque body outside the window. He rose hurriedly and went to the casement. But at the same moment he fancied he heard the jamming of a door or window in quite another direction, and his examination of the casement before him showed him only the silver light of the thinly clouded sky falling uninterruptedly through the bars and foliage on the interior of the whitewashed embrasure. Then a conception of his mistake flashed across him. The line of the *casa* was long, straggling, and exposed elsewhere; why should the attempt to enter or communicate with any one within be confined only to this single point? And why not satisfy himself at once if any trespassers were lounging around the walls, and then confront them boldly in the open? Their discovery and identification was as important as the defeat of their intentions.

He relit the candle, and, placing it on a small table by the wall beyond the visual range of the window, rearranged the curtain so that, while it permitted the light to pass out, it left the room in shadow. He then opened the door softly, locked it behind him, and passed noiselessly into the hall. Susy's

and Mrs. McClosky's rooms were at the further end of the passage, but between them and the boudoir was the open *patio*, and the low murmur of the voices of servants, who still lingered until he should dismiss them for the night. Turning back, he moved silently down the passage, until he reached the narrow arched door to the garden. This he unlocked and opened with the same stealthy caution. The rain had recommenced. Not daring to risk a return to his room, he took from a peg in the recess an old waterproof cloak and "sou'wester" of Peyton's, which still hung there, and passed out into the night, locking the door behind him. To keep the knowledge of his secret patrol from the stablemen, he did not attempt to take out his own horse, but trusted to find some vacquero's mustang in the corral. By good luck an old "Blue Grass" hack of Peyton's, nearest the stockade as he entered, allowed itself to be quickly caught. Using its rope headstall for a bridle, Clarence vaulted on its bare back, and paced cautiously out into the road. Here he kept the curve of the long line of stockade until he reached the outlying field where, half hidden in the withered, sapless,

but still standing stalks of grain, he slowly began a circuit of the *casa*.

The misty gray dome above him, which an invisible moon seemed to have quicksilvered over, alternately lightened and darkened with passing gusts of fine rain. Nevertheless he could see the outline of the broad quadrangle of the house quite distinctly, except on the west side, where a fringe of writhing willows beat the brown adobe walls with their imploring arms at every gust. Elsewhere nothing moved; the view was uninterrupted to where the shining, watery sky met the equally shining, watery plain. He had already made a half circuit of the house, and was still noiselessly picking his way along the furrows, muffled with soaked and broken-down blades, and the velvety upspringing of the "volunteer" growth, when suddenly, not fifty yards before him, without sound or warning, a figure rode out of the grain upon the open cross-road, and deliberately halted with a listless, abstracted, waiting air. Clarence instantly recognized one of his own vacqueros, an undersized half-breed, but he as instantly divined that he was only an outpost or confederate, stationed to give the alarm. The

same precaution had prevented each hearing the other, and the lesser height of the vacquero had rendered him indistinguishable as he preceded Clarence among the grain. As the young man made no doubt that the real trespasser was nearer the *casa*, along the line of willows, he wheeled to intercept him without alarming his sentry. Unfortunately, his horse answered the rope bridle clumsily, and splashed in striking out. The watcher quickly raised his head, and Clarence knew that his only chance was now to suppress him. Determined to do this at any hazard, with a threatening gesture he charged boldly down upon him.

But he had not crossed half the distance between them when the man uttered an appalling cry, so wild and despairing that it seemed to chill even the hot blood in Clarence's veins, and dashed frenziedly down the cross-road into the interminable plain. Before Clarence could determine if that cry was a signal or an involuntary outburst, it was followed instantly by the sound of frightened and struggling hoofs clattering against the wall of the *casa*, and a swaying of the shrubbery near the back gate of the *patio*. Here was his real quarry! With-

out hesitation he dug his heels into the flanks of his horse and rode furiously towards it. As he approached, a long tremor seemed to pass through the shrubbery, with the retreating sound of horse hoofs. The unseen trespasser had evidently taken the alarm and was fleeing, and Clarence dashed in pursuit. Following the sound, for the shrubbery hid the fugitive from view, he passed the last wall of the *casa;* but it soon became evident that the unknown had the better horse. The hoof-beats grew fainter and fainter, and at times appeared even to cease, until his own approach started them again, eventually to fade away in the distance. In vain Clarence dug his heels into the flanks of his heavier steed, and regretted his own mustang; and when at last he reached the edge of the thicket he had lost both sight and sound of the fugitive. The descent to the lower terrace lay before him empty and desolate. The man had escaped!

He turned slowly back with baffled anger and vindictiveness. However, he had prevented something, although he knew not what. The principal had got away, but he had identified his confederate, and for the

first time held a clue to his mysterious visitant. There was no use to alarm the household, which did not seem to have been disturbed. The trespassers were far away by this time, and the attempt would hardly be repeated that night. He made his way quietly back to the corral, let loose his horse, and regained the *casa* unobserved. He unlocked the arched door in the wall, reëntered the darkened passage, stopped a moment to open the door of the boudoir, glance at the closely fastened casement, and extinguish the still burning candle, and, relocking the door securely, made his way to his own room.

But he could not sleep. The whole incident, over so quickly, had nevertheless impressed him deeply, and yet like a dream. The strange yell of the vacquero still rang in his ears, but with an unearthly and superstitious significance that was even more dreamlike in its meaning. He awakened from a fitful slumber to find the light of morning in the room, and Incarnacion standing by his bedside.

The yellow face of the steward was greenish with terror, and his lips were dry.

"Get up, Señor Clarencio; get up at

once, my master. Strange things have happened. Mother of God protect us!"

Clarence rolled to his feet, with the events of the past night struggling back upon his consciousness.

"What mean you, Nascio?" he said, grasping the man's arm, which was still mechanically making the sign of the cross, as he muttered incoherently. "Speak, I command you!"

"It is José, the little vacquero, who is even now at the *padre's* house, raving as a lunatic, stricken as a madman with terror! He has seen him, — the dead alive! Save us!"

"Are you mad yourself, Nascio?" said Clarence. "Whom has he seen?"

"Whom? God help us! the old *padron* — Señor Peyton himself! He rushed towards him here, in the *patio*, last night — out of the air, the sky, the ground, he knew not, — his own self, wrapped in his old storm cloak and hat, and riding his own horse, — erect, terrible, and menacing, with an awful hand upholding a rope — so! He saw him with these eyes, as I see you. What *he* said to him, God knows! The priest, perhaps, for he has made confession!"

In a flash of intelligence Clarence comprehended all. He rose grimly and began to dress himself.

"Not a word of this to the women, — to any one, Nascio, dost thou understand?" he said curtly. "It may be that José has been partaking too freely of aguardiente, — it is possible. I will see the priest myself. But what possesses thee? Collect thyself, good Nascio."

But the man was still trembling.

"It is not all, — Mother of God! it is not all, master!" he stammered, dropping to his knees and still crossing himself. "This morning, beside the corral, they find the horse of Pedro Valdez splashed and spattered on saddle and bridle, and in the stirrup, — dost thou hear? the *stirrup*, — hanging, the torn-off boot of Valdez! Ah, God! The same as *his!* Now do you understand? It is *his* vengeance. No! Jesu forgive me! it is the vengeance of God!"

Clarence was staggered.

"And you have not found Valdez? You have looked for him?" he said, hurriedly throwing on his clothes.

"Everywhere, — all over the plain. The whole rancho has been out since sunrise, —

here and there and everywhere. And there is nothing! Of course not. What would you?" He pointed solemnly to the ground.

"Nonsense!" said Clarence, buttoning his coat and seizing his hat. "Follow me."

He ran down the passage, followed by Incarnacion, through the excited, gesticulating crowd of servants in the *patio*, and out of the back gate. He turned first along the wall of the *casa* towards the barred window of the boudoir. Then a cry came from Incarnacion.

They ran quickly forward. Hanging from the grating of the window, like a mass of limp and saturated clothes, was the body of Pedro Valdez, with one unbooted foot dangling within an inch of the ground. His head was passed inside the grating and fixed as at that moment when the first spring of the frightened horse had broken his neck between the bars as in a garrote, and the second plunge of the terrified animal had carried off his boot in the caught stirrup when it escaped.

CHAPTER XI.

THE winter rains were over and gone, and the whole long line of Californian coast was dashed with color. There were miles of yellow and red poppies, leagues of lupines that painted the gently rounded hills with soft primary hues, and long continuous slopes, like low mountain systems, of daisies and dandelions. At Sacramento it was already summer; the yellow river was flashing and intolerable; the tule and marsh grasses were lush and long; the bloom of cottonwood and sycamore whitened the outskirts of the city, and as Cyrus Hopkins and his daughter Phœbe looked from the veranda of the Placer Hotel, accustomed as they were to the cool trade winds of the coast valleys, they felt homesick from the memory of eastern heats.

Later, when they were surveying the long dinner tables at the table d'hôte with something of the uncomfortable and shamefaced loneliness of the provincial, Phœbe uttered

a slight cry and clutched her father's arm. Mr. Hopkins stayed the play of his squared elbows and glanced inquiringly at his daughter's face. There was a pretty animation in it, as she pointed to a figure that had just entered. It was that of a young man attired in the extravagance rather than the taste of the prevailing fashion, which did not, however, in the least conceal a decided rusticity of limb and movement. A long mustache, which looked unkempt, even in its pomatumed stiffness, and lank, dark hair that had bent but never curled under the barber's iron, made him notable even in that heterogeneous assembly.

"That 's he," whispered Phœbe.

"Who?" said her father.

Alas for the inconsistencies of love! The blush came with the name and not the vision.

"Mr. Hooker," she stammered.

It was, indeed, Jim Hooker. But the rôle of his exaggeration was no longer the same; the remorseful gloom in which he had been habitually steeped had changed into a fatigued, yet haughty, fastidiousness more in keeping with his fashionable garments. He was more peaceful, yet not entirely

placable, and, as he sat down at a side table and pulled down his striped cuffs with his clasped fingers, he cast a glance of critical disapproval on the general company. Nevertheless, he seemed to be furtively watchful of his effect upon them, and as one or two whispered and looked towards him, his consciousness became darkly manifest.

All of which might have intimidated the gentle Phœbe, but did not discompose her father. He rose, and crossing over to Hooker's table, clapped him heartily on the back.

"How do, Hooker? I didn't recognize you in them fine clothes, but Phœbe guessed as how it was you."

Flushed, disconcerted, irritated, but always in wholesome awe of Mr. Hopkins, Jim returned his greeting awkwardly and half hysterically. How he would have received the more timid Phœbe is another question. But Mr. Hopkins, without apparently noticing these symptoms, went on: —

"We 're only just down, Phœbe and me, and as I guess we 'll want to talk over old times, we 'll come alongside o' you. Hold on, and I 'll fetch her."

The interval gave the unhappy Jim a

chance to recover himself, to regain his vanished cuffs, display his heavy watch-chain, curl his mustache, and otherwise reassume his air of blasé fastidiousness. But the transfer made, Phœbe, after shaking hands, became speechless under these perfections. Not so her father.

"If there 's anything in looks, you seem to be prospering," he said grimly; "unless you 're in the tailorin' line, and you 're only showin' off stock. What mout ye be doing?"

"Ye ain't bin long in Sacramento, I reckon?" suggested Jim, with patronizing pity.

"No, we only came this morning," returned Hopkins.

"And you ain't bin to the theatre?" continued Jim.

"No."

"Nor moved much in — in — gin'ral fash'nable sassiety?"

"Not yet," interposed Phœbe, with an air of faint apology.

"Nor seen any of them large posters on the fences, of 'The Prairie Flower; or, Red-handed Dick,' — three-act play with five tableaux, — just the biggest sensation out,

— runnin' for forty nights, — money turned away every night, — standin' room only?" continued Jim, with prolonged toleration.

"No."

"Well, *I* play Red-handed Dick. I thought you might have seen it and recognized me. All those people over there," darkly indicating the long table, "know me. A fellow can't stand it, you know, being stared at by such a vulgar, low-bred lot. It 's gettin' too fresh here. I 'll have to give the landlord notice and cut the whole hotel. They don't seem to have ever seen a gentleman and a professional before."

"Then you 're a play-actor now?" said the farmer, in a tone which did not, however, exhibit the exact degree of admiration which shone in Phœbe's eyes.

"For the present," said Jim, with lofty indifference. "You see I was in — in partnership with McClosky, the manager, and I did n't like the style of the chump that was doin' Red-handed Dick, so I offered to take his place one night to show him how. And by Jinks! the audience, after that night, would n't let anybody else play it, — would n't stand even the biggest, highest-priced stars in it! I reckon," he added

gloomily, "I 'll have to run the darned thing in all the big towns in Californy, — if I don't have to go East with it after all, just for the business. But it 's an awful grind on a man, — leaves him no time, along of the invitations he gets, and what with being run after in the streets and stared at in the hotels he don't get no privacy. There 's men, and women, too, over at that table, that just lie in wait for me here till I come, and don't lift their eyes off me. I wonder they don't bring their opery-glasses with them."

Concerned, sympathizing, and indignant, poor Phœbe turned her brown head and honest eyes in that direction. But because they were honest, they could not help observing that the other table did not seem to be paying the slightest attention to the distinguished impersonator of Red-handed Dick. Perhaps he had been overheard.

"Then that was the reason ye did n't come back to your location. I always guessed it was because you 'd got wind of the smash-up down there, afore we did," said Hopkins grimly.

"What smash-up?" asked Jim, with slightly resentful quickness.

"Why, the smash-up of the Sisters' title, — did n't you hear that?"

There was a slight movement of relief and a return of gloomy hauteur in Jim's manner.

"No, we don't know much of what goes on in the cow counties, up here."

"Ye mout, considerin' it concerns some o' your friends," returned Hopkins dryly. "For the Sisters' title went smash as soon as it was known that Pedro Valdez — the man as started it — had his neck broken outside the walls o' Robles Rancho; and they do say as this yer Brant, *your* friend, had suthin' to do with the breaking of it, though it was laid to the ghost of old Peyton. Anyhow, there was such a big skeer that one of the Greaser gang, who thought he 'd seen the ghost, being a Papist, to save his everlasting soul went to the priest and confessed. But the priest would n't give him absolution until he 'd blown the hull thing, and made it public. And then it turned out that all the dockyments for the title, and even the custom-house paper, were *forged* by Pedro Valdez, and put on the market by his confederates. And that 's just where *your* friend, Clarence Brant,

comes in, for *he* had bought up the whole title from them fellers. Now, either, as some say, he was in the fraud from the beginnin', and never paid anything, or else he was an all-fired fool, and had parted with his money like one. Some allow that the reason was that he was awfully sweet on Mrs. Peyton's adopted daughter, and ez the parents did n't approve of him, he did *this* so as to get a holt over them by the property. But he 's a ruined man, anyway, now; for they say he 's such a darned fool that he 's goin' to pay for all the improvements that the folks who bought under him put into the land, and that 'll take his last cent. I thought I 'd tell you that, for I suppose *you* 've lost a heap in your improvements, and will put in your claim?"

"I reckon I put nearly as much into it as Clar Brant did," said Jim gloomily, "but I ain't goin' to take a cent from him, or go back on him now."

The rascal could not resist this last mendacious opportunity, although he was perfectly sincere in his renunciation, touched in his sympathy, and there was even a film of moisture in his shifting eyes.

Phœbe was thrilled with the generosity of

this noble being, who could be unselfish even in his superior condition. She added softly: —

"And they say that the girl did not care for him at all, but was actually going to run off with Pedro, when he stopped her and sent for Mrs. Peyton."

To her surprise, Jim's face flushed violently.

"It 's all a dod-blasted lie," he said, in a thick stage whisper. "It 's only the hog-wash them Greasers and Pike County galoots ladle out to each other around the stove in a county grocery. But," recalling himself loftily, and with a tolerant wave of his bediamonded hand, "wot kin you expect from one of them cow counties? They ain't satisfied till they drive every gentleman out of the darned gopher-holes they call their 'kentry.'"

In her admiration of what she believed to be a loyal outburst for his friend, Phœbe overlooked the implied sneer at her provincial home. But her father went on with a perfunctory, exasperating, dusty aridity: —

"That mebbee ez mebbee, Mr. Hooker, but the story down in our precinct goes that she gave Mrs. Peyton the slip, — chucked

up her situation as adopted darter, and went off with a queer sort of a cirkiss woman, — one of her own *kin*, and I reckon one of her own *kind*."

To this Mr. Hooker offered no further reply than a withering rebuke of the waiter, a genteel abstraction, and a lofty change of subject. He pressed upon them two tickets for the performance, of which he seemed to have a number neatly clasped in an india-rubber band, and advised them to come early. They would see him after the performance and sup together. He must leave them now, as he had to be punctually at the theatre, and if he lingered he should be pestered by interviewers. He withdrew under a dazzling display of cuff and white handkerchief, and with that inward swing of the arm and slight bowiness of the leg generally recognized in his profession as the lounging exit of high comedy.

The mingling of awe and an uneasy sense of changed relations which that meeting with Jim had brought to Phœbe was not lessened when she entered the theatre with her father that evening, and even Mr. Hopkins seemed to share her feelings. The theatre was large, and brilliant in decora-

tion, the seats were well filled with the same heterogeneous mingling she had seen in the dining-room at the Placer Hotel, but in the parquet were some fashionable costumes and cultivated faces. Mr. Hopkins was not altogether so sure that Jim had been "only gassing." But the gorgeous drop curtain, representing an allegory of Californian prosperity and abundance, presently uprolled upon a scene of Western life almost as striking in its glaring unreality. From a rose-clad English cottage in a subtropical landscape skipped "Rosalie, the Prairie Flower." The briefest of skirts, the most unsullied of stockings, the tiniest of slippers, and the few diamonds that glittered on her fair neck and fingers, revealed at once the simple and unpretending daughter of the American backwoodsman. A tumult of delighted greeting broke from the audience. The bright color came to the pink, girlish cheeks, gratified vanity danced in her violet eyes, and as she piquantly bowed her acknowledgments, this great breath of praise seemed to transfigure and possess her. A very young actor who represented the giddy world in a straw hat and with an effeminate manner was alternately petted and

girded at by her during the opening exposition of the plot, until the statement that a "dark destiny" obliged her to follow her uncle in an emigrant train across the plains closed the act, apparently extinguished him, and left *her* the central figure. So far, she evidently was the favorite. A singular aversion to her crept into the heart of Phœbe.

But the second act brought an Indian attack upon the emigrant train, and here "Rosalie" displayed the archest heroism and the pinkest and most distracting self-possession, in marked contrast to the giddy worldling who, having accompanied her apparently for comic purposes best known to himself, cowered abjectly under wagons, and was pulled ignominiously out of straw, until Red Dick swept out of the wings with a chosen band and a burst of revolvers and turned the tide of victory. Attired as a picturesque combination of the Neapolitan smuggler, river-bar miner, and Mexican vacquero, Jim Hooker instantly began to justify the plaudits that greeted him and the most sanguinary hopes of the audience. A gloomy but fascinating cloud of gunpowder and dark intrigue from that moment hung about the stage.

Yet in this sombre obscuration Rosalie had passed a happy six months, coming out with her character and stockings equally unchanged and unblemished, to be rewarded with the hand of Red Dick and the discovery of her father, the governor of New Mexico, as a white-haired, but objectionable vacquero, at the fall of the curtain.

Through this exciting performance Phœbe sat with a vague and increasing sense of loneliness and distrust. She did not know that Hooker had added to his ordinary inventive exaggeration the form of dramatic composition. But she had early detected the singular fact that such shadowy outlines of plot as the piece possessed were evidently based on his previous narrative of his *own* experiences, and the saving of Susy Peyton — by himself! There was the episode of their being lost on the plains, as he had already related it to her, with the addition of a few years to Susy's age and some vivid picturesqueness to himself as Red Dick. She was not, of course, aware that the part of the giddy worldling was Jim's own conception of the character of Clarence. But what, even to her provincial taste, seemed the extravagance of the piece, she felt, in

some way, reflected upon the truthfulness of the story she had heard. It seemed to be a parody on himself, and in the laughter which some of the most thrilling points produced in certain of the audience, she heard an echo of her own doubts. But even this she could have borne if Jim's confidence had not been given to the general public; it was no longer *hers* alone, she shared it with them. And this strange, bold girl, who acted with him, — the "Blanche Belville" of the bills, — how often he must have told *her* the story, and yet how badly she had learned it! It was not her own idea of it, nor of *him*. In the last extravagant scene she turned her weary and half-shamed eyes from the stage and looked around the theatre. Among a group of loungers by the wall a face that seemed familiar was turned towards her own with a look of kindly and sympathetic recognition. It was the face of Clarence Brant. When the curtain fell, and she and her father rose to go, he was at their side. He seemed older and more superior looking than she had ever thought him before, and there was a gentle yet sad wisdom in his eyes and voice that comforted her even while it made her feel like crying.

"You are satisfied that no harm has come to our friend," he said pleasantly. "Of coursè you recognized him?"

"Oh, yes; we met him to-day," said Phœbe. Her provincial pride impelled her to keep up a show of security and indifference. "We are going to supper with him."

Clarence slightly lifted his brows.

"You are more fortunate than I am," he said smilingly. "I only arrived here at seven, and I must leave at midnight."

Phœbe hesitated a moment, then said with affected carelessness: —

"What do you think of the young girl who plays with him? Do you know her? Who is she?"

He looked at her quickly, and then said, with some surprise: —

"Did he not tell you?"

"No."

"She *was* the adopted daughter of Mrs. Peyton, — Miss Susan Silsbee," he said gravely.

"Then she *did* run away from home as they said," said Phœbe impulsively.

"Not *exactly* as they said," said Clarence gently. "She elected to make her home with her aunt, Mrs. McClosky, who is the

wife of the manager of this theatre, and she adopted the profession a month ago. As it now appears that there was some informality in the old articles of guardianship, Mrs. Peyton would have been powerless to prevent her from doing either, even if she had wished to."

The infelicity of questioning Clarence regarding Susy suddenly flashed upon the forgetful Phœbe, and she colored. Yet, although sad, he did not look like a rejected lover.

"Of course, if she is here with her own relatives, that makes all the difference," she said gently. "It is protection."

"Certainly," said Clarence.

"And," continued Phœbe hesitatingly, "she is playing with — with — an old friend — Mr. Hooker!"

"That is quite proper, too, considering their relations," said Clarence tolerantly.

"I — don't — understand," stammered Phœbe.

The slightly cynical smile on Clarence's face changed as he looked into Phœbe's eyes.

"I 've just heard that they are married," he returned gently.

CHAPTER XII.

NOWHERE had the long season of flowers brought such glory as to the broad plains and slopes of Robles Rancho. By some fortuitous chance of soil, or flood, or drifting pollen, the three terraces had each taken a distinct and separate blossom and tint of color. The straggling line of corral, the crumbling wall of the old garden, the outlying chapel, and even the brown walls of the *casa* itself, were half sunken in the tall racemes of crowding lupines, until from the distance they seemed to be slowly settling in the profundity of a dark-blue sea. The second terrace was a league-long flow of gray and gold daisies, in which the cattle dazedly wandered mid-leg deep. A perpetual sunshine of yellow dandelions lay upon the third. The gentle slope to the dark-green *cañada* was a broad cataract of crimson poppies. Everywhere where water had stood, great patches of color had taken its place. It seemed as if the rains had ceased

only that the broken heavens might drop flowers.

Never before had its beauty — a beauty that seemed built upon a cruel, youthful, obliterating forgetfulness of the past — struck Clarence as keenly as when he had made up his mind that he must leave the place forever. For the tale of his mischance and ill-fortune, as told by Hopkins, was unfortunately true. When he discovered that in his desire to save Peyton's house by the purchase of the Sisters' title he himself had been the victim of a gigantic fraud, he accepted the loss of the greater part of his fortune with resignation, and was even satisfied by the thought that he had at least effected the possession of the property for Mrs. Peyton. But when he found that those of his tenants who had bought under him had acquired only a dubious possession of their lands and no title, he had unhesitatingly reimbursed them for their improvements with the last of his capital. Only the lawless Gilroy had good-humoredly declined. The quiet acceptance of the others did not, unfortunately, preclude their settled belief that Clarence had participated in the fraud, and that even now

his restitution was making a dangerous precedent, subversive of the best interests of the State, and discouraging to immigration. Some doubted his sanity. Only one, struck with the sincerity of his motive, hesitated to take his money, with a look of commiseration on his face.

"Are you not satisfied?" asked Clarence, smiling.

"Yes, but" —

"But what?"

"Nothin'. Only I was thinkin' that a man like you must feel awful lonesome in Calforny!"

Lonely he was, indeed; but his loneliness was not the loss of fortune nor what it might bring. Perhaps he had never fully realized his wealth; it had been an accident rather than a custom of his life, and when it had failed in the only test he had made of its power, it is to be feared that he only sentimentally regretted it. It was too early yet for him to comprehend the veiled blessings of the catastrophe in its merciful disruption of habits and ways of life; his loneliness was still the hopeless solitude left by vanished ideals and overthrown idols. He was satisfied that he had never cared for

Susy, but he still cared for the belief that he had.

After the discovery of Pedro's body that fatal morning, a brief but emphatic interview between himself and Mrs. McClosky had followed. He had insisted upon her immediately accompanying Susy and himself to Mrs. Peyton in San Francisco. Horror-stricken and terrified at the catastrophe, and frightened by the strange looks of the excited servants, they did not dare to disobey him. He had left them with Mrs. Peyton in the briefest preliminary interview, during which he spoke only of the catastrophe, shielding the woman from the presumption of having provoked it, and urging only the importance of settling the question of guardianship at once. It was odd that Mrs. Peyton had been less disturbed than he imagined she would be at even his charitable version of Susy's unfaithfulness to her; it even seemed to him that she had already suspected it. But as he was about to withdraw to leave her to meet them alone, she had stopped him suddenly.

"What would you advise me to do?"

It was his first interview with her since

the revelation of his own feelings. He looked into the pleading, troubled eyes of the woman he now knew he had loved, and stammered: —

"You alone can judge. Only you must remember that one cannot force an affection any more than one can prevent it."

He felt himself blushing, and, conscious of the construction of his words, he even fancied that she was displeased.

"Then you have no preference?" she said, a little impatiently.

"None."

She made a slight gesture with her handsome shoulders, but she only said, "I should have liked to have pleased you in this," and turned coldly away. He had left without knowing the result of the interview; but a few days later he received a letter from her stating that she had allowed Susy to return to her aunt, and that she had resigned all claims to her guardianship.

"It seemed to be a foregone conclusion," she wrote; "and although I cannot think such a change will be for her permanent welfare, it is her present *wish*, and who knows, indeed, if the change will be permanent? I have not allowed the legal

question to interfere with my judgment, although her friends must know that she forfeits any claim upon the estate by her action; but at the same time, in the event of her suitable marriage, I should try to carry out what I believe would have been Mr. Peyton's wishes."

There were a few lines of postscript: "It seems to me that the change would leave you more free to consult your own wishes in regard to continuing your friendship with Susy, and upon such a footing as may please you. I judge from Mrs. McClosky's conversation that she believed you thought you were only doing your duty in reporting to me, and that the circumstances had not altered the good terms in which you all three formerly stood."

Clarence had dropped the letter with a burning indignation that seemed to sting his eyes until a scalding moisture hid the words before him. What might not Susy have said? What exaggeration of his affection was she not capable of suggesting? He recalled Mrs. McClosky, and remembered her easy acceptance of him as Susy's lover. What had they told Mrs. Peyton? What must be her opinion of his deceit towards

herself? It was hard enough to bear this before he knew he loved her. It was intolerable now! And this is what she meant when she suggested that he should renew his old terms with Susy; it was for *him* that this ill-disguised, scornful generosity in regard to Susy's pecuniary expectations was intended. What should he do? He would write to her, and indignantly deny any clandestine affection for Susy. But could he do that, in honor, in truthfulness? Would it not be better to write and confess all? Yes, — *everything*.

Fortunately for his still boyish impulsiveness, it was at this time that the discovery of his own financial ruin came to him. The inquest on the body of Pedro Valdez and the confession of his confidant had revealed the facts of the fraudulent title and forged testamentary documents. Although it was correctly believed that Pedro had met his death in an escapade of gallantry or intrigue, the coroner's jury had returned a verdict of "accidental death," and the lesser scandal was lost in the wider, far-spreading disclosure of fraud. When he had resolved to assume all the liabilities of his purchase, he was obliged to write to Mrs. Peyton and

confess his ruin. But he was glad to remind her that it did not alter *her* status or security; he had only given her the possession, and she would revert to her original and now uncontested title. But as there was now no reason for his continuing the stewardship, and as he must adopt some profession and seek his fortune elsewhere, he begged her to relieve him of his duty. Albeit written with a throbbing heart and suffused eyes, it was a plain, business-like, and practical letter. Her reply was equally cool and matter of fact. She was sorry to hear of his losses, although she could not agree with him that they could logically sever his present connection with the rancho, or that, placed upon another and distinctly business footing, the occupation would not be as remunerative to him as any other. But, of course, if he had a preference for some more independent position, that was another question, although he would forgive her for using the privilege of her years to remind him that his financial and business success had not yet justified his independence. She would also advise him not to decide hastily, or, at least, to wait until she had again thoroughly gone over her hus-

band's papers with her lawyer, in reference to the old purchase of the Sisters' title, and the conditions under which it was bought. She knew that Mr. Brant would not refuse this as a matter of business, nor would that friendship, which she valued so highly, allow him to imperil the possession of the rancho by leaving it at such a moment. As soon as she had finished the examination of the papers, she would write again. Her letter seemed to leave him no hope, if, indeed, he had ever indulged in any. It was the practical kindliness of a woman of business, nothing more. As to the examination of her husband's papers, that was a natural precaution. He alone knew that they would give no record of a transaction which had never occurred. He briefly replied that his intention to seek another situation was unchanged, but that he would cheerfully await the arrival of his successor. Two weeks passed. Then Mr. Sanderson, Mrs. Peyton's lawyer, arrived, bringing an apologetic note from Mrs. Peyton. She was so sorry her business was still delayed, but as she had felt that she had no right to detain him entirely at Robles, she had sent to Mr. Sanderson to *temporarily* relieve him, that he

might be free to look around him or visit San Francisco in reference to his own business, only extracting a promise from him that he would return to Robles to meet her at the end of the week, before settling upon anything.

The bitter smile with which Clarence had read thus far suddenly changed. Some mysterious touch of unbusiness-like but womanly hesitation, that he had never noticed in her previous letters, gave him a faint sense of pleasure, as if her note had been perfumed. He had availed himself of the offer. It was on this visit to Sacramento that he had accidentally discovered the marriage of Susy and Hooker.

"It 's a great deal better business for her to have a husband in the 'profesh ' if she 's agoin' to stick to it," said his informant, Mrs. McClosky, "and she 's nothing if she ain't business and profesh, Mr. Brant. I never see a girl that was born for the stage — yes, you might say jess cut out o' the boards of the stage — as that girl Susy is! And that 's jest what 's the matter; and *you* know it, and *I* know it, and there you are!"

It was with these experiences that Clarence was to-day reëntering the wooded and

rocky gateway of the rancho from the high road of the *cañada ;* but as he cantered up the first slope, through the drift of scarlet poppies that almost obliterated the track, and the blue and yellow blooms of the terraces again broke upon his view, he thought only of Mrs. Peyton's pleasure in this changed aspect of her old home. She had told him of it once before, and of her delight in it; and he had once thought how happy he should be to see it with her.

The servant who took his horse told him that the señora had arrived that morning from Santa Inez, bringing with her the two Señoritas Hernandez from the rancho of Los Canejos, and that other guests were expected. And there was the Señor Sanderson and his Reverence Padre Esteban. Truly an affair of hospitality, the first since the *padron* died. Whatever dream Clarence might have had of opportunities for confidential interview was rudely dispelled. Yet Mrs. Peyton had left orders to be informed at once of Don Clarencio's arrival.

As he crossed the *patio* and stepped upon the corridor he fancied he already detected in the internal arrangements the subtle influence of Mrs. Peyton's taste and the inde-

finable domination of the mistress. For an instant he thought of anticipating the servant and seeking her in the boudoir, but some instinct withheld him, and he turned into the study which he had used as an office. It was empty; a few embers glimmered on the hearth. At the same moment there was a light step behind him, and Mrs. Peyton entered and closed the door behind her. She was very beautiful. Although paler and thinner, there was an odd sort of animation about her, so unlike her usual repose that it seemed almost feverish.

"I thought we could talk together a few moments before the guests arrive. The house will be presently so full, and my duties as hostess commence."

"I was — about to seek you — in — in the boudoir," hesitated Clarence.

She gave an impatient shiver.

"Good heavens, not there! I shall never go there again. I should fancy every time I looked out of the window that I saw the head of that man between the bars. No! I am only thankful that I was n't here at the time, and that I can keep my remembrance of the dear old place unchanged." She checked herself a little abruptly, and

then added somewhat irrelevantly but cheerfully, "Well, you have been away? What have you done?"

"Nothing," said Clarence.

"Then you have kept your promise," she said, with the same nervous hilarity.

"I have returned here without making any other engagement," he said gravely; "but I have not altered my determination."

She shrugged her shoulders again, or, as it seemed, the skin of her tightly fitting black dress above them, with the sensitive shiver of a highly groomed horse, and moved to the hearth as if for warmth; put her slim, slippered foot upon the low fender, drawing, with a quick hand, the whole width of her skirt behind her until it clingingly accented the long, graceful curve from her hip to her feet. All this was so unlike her usual fastidiousness and repose that he was struck by it. With her eyes on the glowing embers of the hearth, and tentatively advancing her toe to its warmth and drawing it away, she said: —

"Of course, you must please yourself. I am afraid I have no right except that of habit and custom to keep you here; and you know," she added, with an only half-with-

held bitterness, "that they are not always very effective with young people who prefer to have the ordering of their own lives. But I have something still to tell you before you finally decide. I have, as you know, been looking over my — over Mr. Peyton's papers very carefully. Well, as a result, I find, Mr. Brant, that there is no record whatever of his wonderfully providential purchase of the Sisters' title from you; that he never entered into any written agreement with you, and never paid you a cent; and that, furthermore, his papers show me that he never even contemplated it; nor, indeed, even knew of *your* owning the title when he died. Yes, Mr. Brant, it was all to *your* foresight and prudence, and *your* generosity alone, that we owe our present possession of the rancho. When you helped us into that awful window, it was *your* house we were entering; and if it had been *you*, and not those wretches, who had chosen to shut the doors on us after the funeral, we could never have entered here again. Don't deny it, Mr. Brant. I have suspected it a long time, and when you spoke of changing *your* position, I determined to find out if it was n't *I* who had to leave the house rather

than you. One moment, please. And I did find out, and it *was* I. Don't speak, please, yet. And now," she said, with a quick return to her previous nervous hilarity, "knowing this, as you did, and knowing, too, that I would know it when I examined the papers, — don't speak, I 'm not through yet, — don't you think that it was just a *little* cruel for you to try to hurry me, and make me come here instead of your coming to *me* in San Francisco, when I gave you leave for that purpose?"

"But, Mrs. Peyton," gasped Clarence.

"Please don't interrupt me," said the lady, with a touch of her old imperiousness, "for in a moment I must join my guests. When I found you would n't tell me, and left it to me to find out, I could only go away as I did, and really leave you to control what I believed was your own property. And I thought, too, that I understood your motives, and, to be frank with you, *that* worried me; for I believed I knew the disposition and feelings of a certain person better than yourself."

"One moment," broke out Clarence, "you *must* hear me, now. Foolish and misguided as that purchase may have been, I swear to

you I had only one motive in making it, — to save the homestead for you and your husband, who had been my first and earliest benefactors. What the result of it was, you, as a business woman, know; your friends know; your lawyer will tell you the same. You owe me nothing. I have given you nothing but the repossession of this property, which any other man could have done, and perhaps less stupidly than I did. I would not have forced you to come here to hear this if I had dreamed of your suspicions, or even if I had simply understood that you would see me in San Francisco as I passed through."

"Passed through? Where were you going?" she said quickly.

"To Sacramento."

The abrupt change in her manner startled him to a recollection of Susy, and he blushed. She bit her lips, and moved towards the window.

"Then you saw her?" she said, turning suddenly towards him. The inquiry of her beautiful eyes was more imperative than her speech.

Clarence recognized quickly what he thought was his cruel blunder in touching

the half-healed wound of separation. But he had gone too far to be other than perfectly truthful now.

"Yes; I saw her on the stage," he said, with a return of his boyish earnestness; "and I learned something which I wanted you to first hear from me. She is *married*, — and to Mr. Hooker, who is in the same theatrical company with her. But I want you to think, as I honestly do, that it is the best for her. She has married in her profession, which is a great protection and a help to her success, and she has married a man who can look lightly upon certain qualities in her that others might not be so lenient to. His worst faults are on the surface, and will wear away in contact with the world, and he looks up to her as his superior. I gathered this from her friend, for I did not speak with her myself; I did not go there to see her. But as I expected to be leaving you soon, I thought it only right that as I was the humble means of first bringing her into your life, I should bring you this last news, which I suppose takes her out of it forever. Only I want you to believe that *you* have nothing to regret, and that *she* is neither lost nor unhappy."

The expression of suspicious inquiry on her face when he began changed gradually to perplexity as he continued, and then relaxed into a faint, peculiar smile. But there was not the slightest trace of that pain, wounded pride, indignation, or anger, that he had expected to see upon it.

"That means, I suppose, Mr. Brant, that *you* no longer care for her?"

The smile had passed, yet she spoke now with a half-real, half-affected archness that was also unlike her.

"It means," said Clarence with a white face, but a steady voice, "that I care for her now as much as I ever cared for her, no matter to what folly it once might have led me. But it means, also, that there was no time when I was not able to tell it to *you* as frankly as I do now" —

"One moment, please," she interrupted, and turned quickly towards the door. She opened it and looked out. "I thought they were calling me, — and — I — I — *must* go now, Mr. Brant. And without finishing my business either, or saying half I had intended to say. But wait" — she put her hand to her head in a pretty perplexity, "it 's a moonlight night, and I 'll propose

after dinner a stroll in the gardens, and you can manage to walk a little with me." She stopped again, returned, said, "It was very kind of you to think of me at Sacramento," held out her hand, allowed it to remain for an instant, cool but acquiescent, in his warmer grasp, and with the same odd youthfulness of movement and gesture slipped out of the door.

An hour later she was at the head of her dinner table, serene, beautiful, and calm, in her elegant mourning, provokingly inaccessible in the sweet deliberation of her widowed years; Padre Esteban was at her side with a local magnate, who had known Peyton and his wife, while Donna Rosita and a pair of liquid-tongued, childlike señoritas were near Clarence and Sanderson. To the priest Mrs. Peyton spoke admiringly of the changes in the rancho and the restoration of the Mission Chapel, and together they had commended Clarence from the level of their superior passionless reserve and years. Clarence felt hopelessly young and hopelessly lonely; the naïve prattle of the young girls beside him appeared infantine. In his abstraction, he heard Mrs. Peyton allude to the beauty of the night, and propose that

after coffee and chocolate the ladies should put on their wraps and go with her to the old garden. Clarence raised his eyes; she was not looking at him, but there was a slight consciousness in her face that was not there before, and the faintest color in her cheek, still lingering, no doubt, from the excitement of conversation.

It was a cool, tranquil, dewless night when they at last straggled out, mere black and white patches in the colorless moonlight. The brilliancy of the flower-hued landscape was subdued under its passive, pale austerity; even the gray and gold of the second terrace seemed dulled and confused. At any other time Clarence might have lingered over this strange effect, but his eyes followed only a tall figure, in a long striped burnous, that moved gracefully beside the *soutaned* priest. As he approached, it turned towards him.

"Ah! here you are. I just told Father Esteban that you talked of leaving to-morrow, and that he would have to excuse me a few moments while you showed me what you had done to the old garden."

She moved beside him, and, with a hesitation that was not unlike a more youthful

timidity, slipped her hand through his arm. It was for the first time, and, without thinking, he pressed it impulsively to his side. I have already intimated that Clarence's reserve was at times qualified by singular directness.

A few steps carried them out of hearing; a few more, and they seemed alone in the world. The long adobe wall glanced away emptily beside them, and was lost; the black shadows of the knotted pear-trees were beneath their feet. They began to walk with the slight affectation of treading the shadows as if they were patterns on a carpet. Clarence was voiceless, and yet he seemed to be moving beside a spirit that must be first addressed.

But it was flesh and blood nevertheless.

"I interrupted you in something you were saying when I left the office," she said quietly.

"I was speaking of Susy," returned Clarence eagerly; "and" —

"Then you need n't go on," interrupted Mrs. Peyton quickly. "I understand you, and believe you. I would rather talk of something else. We have not yet arranged how I can make restitution to you for the

capital you sank in saving this place. You will be reasonable, Mr. Brant, and not leave me with the shame and pain of knowing that you ruined yourself for the sake of your old friends. For it is no more a sentimental idea of mine to feel in this way than it is a fair and sensible one for you to imply that a mere quibble of construction absolves me from responsibility. Mr. Sanderson himself admits that the repossession you gave us is a fair and legal basis for any arrangement of sharing or division of the property with you, that might enable you to remain here and continue the work you have so well begun. Have you no suggestion, or must it come from *me*, Mr. Brant?"

"Neither. Let us not talk of that now."

She did not seem to notice the boyish doggedness of his speech, except so far as it might have increased her inconsequent and nervously pitched levity.

"Then suppose we speak of the Misses Hernandez, with whom you scarcely exchanged a word at dinner, and whom I invited for you and your fluent Spanish. They are charming girls, even if they are a little stupid. But what can I do? If I am to live here, I must have a few young people

around me, if only to make the place cheerful for others. Do you know I have taken a great fancy to Miss Rogers, and have asked her to visit me. I think she is a good friend of yours, although perhaps she is a little shy. What 's the matter? You have nothing against her, have you?"

Clarence had stopped short. They had reached the end of the pear-tree shadows. A few steps more would bring them to the fallen south wall of the garden and the open moonlight beyond, but to the right an olive alley of deeper shadow diverged.

"No," he said, with slow deliberation; "I have to thank Mary Rogers for having discovered something in me that I have been blindly, foolishly, and hopelessly struggling with."

"And, pray, what was that?" said Mrs. Peyton sharply.

"That I love you!"

Mrs. Peyton was fairly startled. The embarrassment of any truth is apt to be in its eternal abruptness, which no deviousness of tact or circumlocution of diplomacy has ever yet surmounted. Whatever had been in her heart, or mind, she was unprepared for this directness. The bolt had

dropped from the sky; they were alone; there was nothing between the stars and the earth but herself and this man and this truth; it could not be overlooked, surmounted, or escaped from. A step or two more would take her out of the garden into the moonlight, but always into this awful frankness of blunt and outspoken nature. She hesitated, and turned the corner into the olive shadows. It was, perhaps, more dangerous; but less shameless, and less like truckling. And the appallingly direct Clarence instantly followed.

"I know you will despise me, hate me; and, perhaps, worst of all, disbelieve me; but I swear to you, now, that I have always loved you, — yes, *always!* When first I came here, it was not to see my old playmate, but *you*, for I had kept the memory of you as I first saw you when a boy, and you have always been my ideal. I have thought of, dreamed of, worshiped, and lived for no other woman. Even when I found Susy again, grown up here at your side; even when I thought that I might, with your consent, marry her, it was that I might be with *you* always; that I might be a part of *your* home, your family, and have

a place with her in *your* heart; for it was you I loved, and *you* only. Don't laugh at me, Mrs. Peyton, it is the truth, the whole truth, I am telling you. God help me!"

If she only *could* have laughed, — harshly, ironically, or even mercifully and kindly! But it would not come. And she burst out: —

"I am not laughing. Good heavens, don't you see? It is *me* you are making ridiculous."

"*You* ridiculous?" he said in a momentarily choked, half-stupefied voice. "You — a beautiful woman, my superior in everything, the mistress of these lands where I am only steward — made ridiculous, not by my presumption, but by my confession? Was the saint you just now admired in Father Esteban's chapel ridiculous because of the *peon* clowns who were kneeling before it?"

"Hush! This is wicked! Stop!"

She felt she was now on firm ground, and made the most of it in voice and manner. She must draw the line somewhere, and she would draw it beween passion and impiety.

"Not until I have told you all, and I

must before I leave you. I loved you when I came here, — even when your husband was alive. Don't be angry, Mrs. Peyton; *he* would not, and need not, have been angry; he would have pitied the foolish boy, who, in the very innocence and ignorance of his passion, might have revealed it to him as he did to everybody but *one*. And yet, I sometimes think you might have guessed it, had you thought of me at all. It must have been on my lips that day I sat with you in the boudoir. I know that I was filled with it; with it and with you; with your presence, with your beauty, your grace of heart and mind, — yes, Mrs. Peyton, even with your own unrequited love for Susy. Only, then, I knew not what it was."

"But I think *I* can tell you what it was then, and now," said Mrs. Peyton, recovering her nervous little laugh, though it died a moment after on her lips. "I remember it very well. You told me then that *I reminded you of your mother*. Well, I am not old enough to be your mother, Mr. Brant, but I am old enough to have been, and might have been, the mother of your wife. That was what you meant then; that

is what you mean now. I was wrong to accuse you of trying to make me ridiculous. I ask your pardon. Let us leave it as it was that day in the boudoir, as it is *now*. Let me still remind you of your mother, — I know she must have been a good woman to have had so good a son, — and when you have found some sweet young girl to make you happy, come to me for a mother's blessing, and we will laugh at the recollection and misunderstanding of this evening."

Her voice did not, however, exhibit that exquisite maternal tenderness which the beatific vision ought to have called up, and the persistent voice of Clarence could not be evaded in the shadow.

"I said you reminded me of my mother," he went on at her side, "because I knew her and lost her only as a child. She never was anything to me but a memory, and yet an ideal of all that was sweet and lovable in woman. Perhaps it was a dream of what she might have been when she was as young in years as you. If it pleases you still to misunderstand me, it may please you also to know that there is a reminder of her even in this. I have no remembrance of a word of affection from her, nor a caress; I have

been as hopeless in my love for her who was my mother, as of the woman I would make my wife."

"But you have seen no one, you know no one, you are young, you scarcely know your own self! You will forget this, you will forget *me!* And if — if — I should — listen to you, what would the world say, what would *you* yourself say a few years hence? Oh, be reasonable. Think of it, — it would be so wild, — so mad! so — so — utterly ridiculous!"

In proof of its ludicrous quality, two tears escaped her eyes in the darkness. But Clarence caught the white flash of her withdrawn handkerchief in the shadow, and captured her returning hand. It was trembling, but did not struggle, and presently hushed itself to rest in his.

"I 'm not only a fool but a brute," he said in a lower voice. "Forgive me. I have given you pain, — you, for whom I would have died."

They had both stopped. He was still holding her sleeping hand. His arm had stolen around the burnous so softly that it followed the curves of her figure as lightly as a fold of the garment, and was presum-

ably unfelt. Grief has its privileges, and suffering exonerates a questionable situation. In another moment her fair head *might* have dropped upon his shoulder. But an approaching voice uprose in the adjoining broad *allée*. It might have been the world speaking through the voice of the lawyer Sanderson.

"Yes, he is a good fellow, and an intelligent fellow, too, but a perfect child in his experience of mankind."

They both started, but Mrs. Peyton's hand suddenly woke up and grasped his firmly. Then she said in a higher, but perfectly level tone: —

"Yes, I think with you we had better look at it again in the sunlight to-morrow. But here come our friends; they have probably been waiting for us to join them and go in."

. . . . . .

The wholesome freshness of early morning was in the room when Clarence awoke, cleared and strengthened. His resolution had been made. He would leave the rancho that morning, to enter the world again and seek his fortune elsewhere. This was only right to *her*, whose future it should never be

said he had imperiled by his folly and inexperience; and if, in a year or two of struggle he could prove his right to address her again. he would return. He had not spoken to her since they had parted in the garden, with the grim truths of the lawyer ringing in his ears, but he had written a few lines of farewell, to be given to her after he had left. He was calm in his resolution, albeit a little pale and hollow-eyed for it.

He crept downstairs in the gray twilight of the scarce-awakened house, and made his way to the stables. Saddling his horse, and mounting, he paced forth into the crisp morning air. The sun, just risen, was everywhere bringing out the fresh color of the flower-strewn terraces, as the last night's shadows, which had hidden them, were slowly beaten back. He cast a last look at the brown adobe quadrangle of the quiet house, just touched with the bronzing of the sun, and then turned his face towards the highway. As he passed the angle of the old garden he hesitated, but, strong in his resolution, he put the recollection of last night behind him, and rode by without raising his eyes.

"Clarence!"

It was *her* voice. He wheeled his horse. She was standing behind the *grille* in the old wall as he had seen her standing on the day he had ridden to his rendezvous with Susy. A Spanish *manta* was thrown over her head and shoulders, as if she had dressed hastily, and had run out to intercept him while he was still in the stable. Her beautiful face was pale in its black-hooded recess, and there were faint circles around her lovely eyes.

"You were going without saying 'good-by'!" she said softly.

She passed her slim white hand between the grating. Clarence leaped to the ground, caught it, and pressed it to his lips. But he did not let it go.

"No! no!" she said, struggling to withdraw it. "It is better as it is — as — as you have decided it to be. Only I could not let you go thus, — without a word. There now, — go, Clarence, go. Please! Don't you see I am behind these bars? Think of them as the years that separate us, my poor, dear, foolish boy. Think of them as standing between us, growing closer, heavier, and more cruel and hopeless as the years go on."

Ah, well! they had been good bars a hundred and fifty years ago, when it was thought as necessary to repress the innocence that was behind them as the wickedness that was without. They had done duty in the convent at Santa Inez, and the monastery of Santa Barbara, and had been brought hither in Governor Micheltorrenas' time to keep the daughters of Robles from the insidious contact of the outer world, when they took the air in their cloistered pleasance. Guitars had tinkled against them in vain, and they had withstood the stress and storm of love tokens. But, like many other things which have had their day and time, they had retained their semblance of power, even while rattling loosely in their sockets, only because no one had ever thought of putting them to the test, and, in the strong hand of Clarence, assisted, perhaps, by the leaning figure of Mrs. Peyton, I grieve to say that the whole *grille* suddenly collapsed, became a frame of tinkling iron, and then clanked, bar by bar, into the road. Mrs. Peyton uttered a little cry and drew back, and Clarence, leaping the ruins, caught her in his arms.

For a moment only, for she quickly with-

drew from them, and although the morning sunlight was quite rosy on her cheeks, she said gravely, pointing to the dismantled opening: —

"I suppose you *must* stay now, for you never could leave me here alone and defenseless."

He stayed. And with this fulfillment of his youthful dreams the romance of his young manhood seemed to be completed, and so closed the second volume of this trilogy. But what effect that fulfillment of youth had upon his maturer years, or the fortunes of those who were nearly concerned in it, may be told in a later and final chronicle.

CLARENCE

CLARENCE.

PART I.

CHAPTER I.

As Clarence Brant, President of the Robles Land Company, and husband of the rich widow of John Peyton, of the Robles Ranche, mingled with the outgoing audience of the Cosmopolitan Theatre, at San Francisco, he elicited the usual smiling nods and recognition due to his good looks and good fortune. But as he hurriedly slipped through the still lingering winter's rain into the smart coupé that was awaiting him, and gave the order "Home," the word struck him with a peculiarly ironical significance. His home was a handsome one, and lacked nothing in appointment and comfort, but he had gone to the theatre to evade its hollow loneliness. Nor was it because his wife was not there, for he had a miserable consciousness that her temporary absence had nothing

to do with his homelessness. The distraction of the theatre over, that dull, vague, but aching sense of loneliness which was daily growing upon him returned with greater vigor.

He leaned back in the coupé and gloomily reflected.

He had been married scarcely a year, yet even in the illusions of the honeymoon the woman, older than himself, and the widow of his old patron, had half unconsciously reasserted herself, and slipped back into the domination of her old position. It was at first pleasant enough,— this half-maternal protectorate which is apt to mingle even with the affections of younger women,— and Clarence, in his easy, half-feminine intuition of the sex, yielded, as the strong are apt to yield, through the very consciousness of their own superiority. But this is a quality the weaker are not apt to recognize, and the woman who has once tasted equal power with her husband not only does not easily relegate it, but even makes its continuance a test of the affections. The usual triumphant feminine conclusion, "Then you no longer love me," had in Clarence's brief experience gone even further and reached

its inscrutable climax, "Then I no longer love you," although shown only in a momentary hardening of the eye and voice. And added to this was his sudden, but confused remembrance that he had seen that eye and heard that voice in marital altercation during Judge Peyton's life, and that he himself, her boy partisan, had sympathized with her. Yet, strange to say, this had given him more pain than her occasional other reversions to the past — to her old suspicions of him when he was a youthful protégé of her husband and a presumed suitor of her adopted daughter Susy. High natures are more apt to forgive wrong done to themselves than any abstract injustice. And her capricious tyranny over her dependents and servants, or an unreasoning enmity to a neighbor or friend, outraged his finer sense more than her own misconception of himself. Nor did he dream that this was a thing most women seldom understand, or, understanding, ever forgive.

The coupé rattled over the stones or swirled through the muddy pools of the main thoroughfares. Newspaper and telegraphic offices were still brilliantly lit, and crowds were gathered among the bulletin boards.

He knew that news had arrived from Washington that evening of the first active outbreaks of secession, and that the city was breathless with excitement. Had he not just come from the theatre, where certain insignificant allusions in the play had been suddenly caught up and cheered or hissed by hitherto unknown partisans, to the dumb astonishment of a majority of the audience comfortably settled to money-getting and their own affairs alone? Had he not applauded, albeit half-scornfully, the pretty actress — his old playmate Susy — who had audaciously and all incongruously waved the American flag in their faces? Yes! he had known it; had lived for the last few weeks in an atmosphere electrically surcharged with it — and yet it had chiefly affected him in his personal homelessness. For his wife was a Southerner, a born slaveholder, and a secessionist, whose noted prejudices to the North had even outrun her late husband's politics. At first the piquancy and recklessness of her opinionative speech amused him as part of her characteristic flavor, or as a lingering youthfulness which the maturer intellect always pardons. He had never taken her politics seriously — why

should he? With her head on his shoulder he had listened to her extravagant diatribes against the North. He had forgiven her outrageous indictment of his caste and his associates for the sake of the imperious but handsome lips that uttered it. But when he was compelled to listen to her words echoed and repeated by her friends and family; when he found that with the clannishness of her race she had drawn closer to them in this controversy, — that she depended upon them for her intelligence and information rather than upon him, — he had awakened to the reality of his situation. He had borne the allusions of her brother, whose old scorn for his dependent childhood had been embittered by his sister's marriage and was now scarcely concealed. Yet, while he had never altered his own political faith and social creed in this antagonistic atmosphere, he had often wondered, with his old conscientiousness and characteristic self-abnegation, whether his own political convictions were not merely a revulsion from his domestic tyranny and alien surroundings.

In the midst of this gloomy retrospect the coupé stopped with a jerk before his

own house. The door was quickly opened by a servant, who appeared to be awaiting him.

"Some one to see you in the library, sir," said the man, "and" — He hesitated and looked towards the coupé.

"Well?" said Clarence impatiently.

"He said, sir, as how you were not to send away the carriage."

"Indeed, and who is it?" demanded Clarence sharply.

"Mr. Hooker. He said I was to say Jim Hooker."

The momentary annoyance in Clarence's face changed to a look of reflective curiosity.

"He said he knew you were at the theatre, and he would wait until you came home," continued the man, dubiously watching his master's face. "He don't know you 've come in, sir, and — and I can easily get rid of him."

"No matter now. I 'll see him, and," added Clarence, with a faint smile, "let the carriage wait."

Yet, as he turned towards the library he was by no means certain that an interview with the old associate of his boyhood under Judge Peyton's guardianship would divert his mind. Yet he let no trace of his doubts

nor of his past gloom show in his face as he entered the room.

Mr. Hooker was apparently examining the elegant furniture and luxurious accommodation with his usual resentful enviousness. Clarence had got a "soft thing." That it was more or less the result of his "artfulness," and that he was unduly "puffed up" by it, was, in Hooker's characteristic reasoning, equally clear. As his host smilingly advanced with outstretched hand, Mr. Hooker's efforts to assume a proper abstraction of manner and contemptuous indifference to Clarence's surroundings which should wound his vanity ended in his lolling back at full length in the chair with his eyes on the ceiling. But, remembering suddenly that he was really the bearer of a message to Clarence, it struck him that his supine position was, from a theatrical view-point, infelicitous. In his experiences of the stage he had never delivered a message in that way. He rose awkwardly to his feet.

"It was so good of you to wait," said Clarence courteously.

"Saw you in the theatre," said Hooker brusquely. "Third row in parquet. Susy

said it was you, and had suthin' to say to you. Suthin' you ought to know," he continued, with a slight return of his old mystery of manner which Clarence so well remembered. "You saw *her* — she fetched the house with that flag business, eh? She knows which way the cat is going to jump, you bet. I tell you, for all the blowing of these secessionists, the Union 's goin' to pay! Yes, sir!" He stopped, glanced round the handsome room, and added darkly, "Mebbee better than this."

With the memory of Hooker's characteristic fondness for mystery still in his mind, Clarence overlooked the innuendo, and said smilingly, —

"Why did n't you bring Mrs. Hooker here? I should have been honored with her company."

Mr. Hooker frowned slightly at this seeming levity.

"Never goes out after a performance. Nervous exhaustion. Left her at our rooms in Market Street. We can drive there in ten minutes. That 's why I asked to have the carriage wait."

Clarence hesitated. Without caring in the least to renew the acquaintance of his

old playmate and sweetheart, a meeting that night in some vague way suggested to him a providential diversion. Nor was he deceived by any gravity in the message. With his remembrance of Susy's theatrical tendencies, he was quite prepared for any capricious futile extravagance.

"You are sure we will not disturb her?" he said politely.

"No."

Clarence led the way to the carriage. If Mr. Hooker expected him during the journey to try to divine the purport of Susy's message he was disappointed. His companion did not allude to it. Possibly looking upon it as a combined theatrical performance, Clarence preferred to wait for Susy as the better actor. The carriage rolled rapidly through the now deserted streets, and at last, under the directions of Mr. Hooker, who was leaning half out of the window, it drew up at a middle-class restaurant, above whose still lit and steaming windows were some ostentatiously public apartments, accessible from a side entrance. As they ascended the staircase together, it became evident that Mr. Hooker was scarcely more at his ease in the character of host than he

had been as guest. He stared gloomily at a descending visitor, grunted audibly at a waiter in the passage, and stopped before a door, where a recently deposited tray displayed the half-eaten carcase of a fowl, an empty champagne bottle, two half-filled glasses, and a faded bouquet. The whole passage was redolent with a singular blending of damp cooking, stale cigarette smoke, and patchouli.

Putting the tray aside with his foot, Mr. Hooker opened the door hesitatingly and peered into the room, muttered a few indistinct words, which were followed by a rapid rustling of skirts, and then, with his hand still on the door-knob, turning to Clarence, who had discreetly halted on the threshold, flung the door open theatrically and bade him enter.

"She is somewhere in the suite," he added, with a large wave of the hand towards a door that was still oscillating. "Be here in a minit."

Clarence took in the apartment with a quiet glance. Its furniture had the frayed and discolored splendors of a public parlor which had been privately used and maltreated; there were stains in the large

medallioned carpet; the gilded veneer had been chipped from a heavy centre table, showing the rough, white deal beneath, which gave it the appearance of a stage "property;" the walls, paneled with gilt-framed mirrors, reflected every domestic detail or private relaxation with shameless publicity. A damp waterproof, shawl, and open newspaper were lying across the once brilliant sofa; a powder-puff, a plate of fruit, and a play-book were on the centre table, and on the marble-topped sideboard was Mr. Hooker's second-best hat, with a soiled collar, evidently but lately exchanged for the one he had on, peeping over its brim. The whole apartment seemed to mingle the furtive disclosures of the dressing-room with the open ostentations of the stage, with even a slight suggestion of the auditorium in a few scattered programmes on the floor and chairs.

The inner door opened again with a slight theatrical start, and Susy, in an elaborate dressing-gown, moved languidly into the room. She apparently had not had time to change her underskirt, for there was the dust of the stage on its delicate lace edging, as she threw herself into an armchair and

crossed her pretty slippered feet before her. Her face was pale, its pallor incautiously increased by powder; and as Clarence looked at its still youthful, charming outline, he was not perhaps sorry that the exquisite pink and white skin beneath, which he had once kissed, was hidden from that awakened recollection. Yet there was little trace of the girlish Susy in the pretty, but prematurely jaded, actress before him, and he felt momentarily relieved. It was her youth and freshness appealing to his own youth and imagination that he had loved — not *her*. Yet as she greeted him with a slight exaggeration of glance, voice, and manner, he remembered that even as a girl she was an actress.

Nothing of this, however, was in his voice and manner as he gently thanked her for the opportunity of meeting her again. And he was frank, for the diversion he had expected he had found; he even was conscious of thinking more kindly of his wife who had supplanted her.

"I told Jim he must fetch you if he had to carry you," she said, striking the palm of her hand with her fan, and glancing at her husband. "I reckon he guessed *why*,

though I did n't tell him — I don't tell Jim *everything*."

Here Jim rose, and looking at his watch, "guessed he 'd run over to the Lick House and get some cigars." If he was acting upon some hint from his wife, his simulation was so badly done that Clarence felt his first sense of uneasiness. But as Hooker closed the door awkwardly and unostentatiously behind him, Clarence smilingly said he had waited to hear the message from her own lips.

"Jim only knows what he 's heard outside: the talk of men, you know, — and he hears a good deal of that — more, perhaps, than *you* do. It was that which put me up to finding out the truth. And I did n't rest till I did. I 'm not to be fooled, Clarence, — you don't mind my calling you Clarence now we 're both married and done for, — and I 'm not the kind to be fooled by anybody from the Cow counties — and that 's the Robles Ranche. I 'm a Southern woman myself from Missouri, but I 'm for the Union first, last, and all the time, and I call myself a match for any lazy, dawdling, lash-swinging slaveholder and slaveholderess — whether they 're mixed blood, Heaven only knows,

or what — or their friends or relations, or the dirty half-Spanish grandees and their mixed half-nigger peons who truckle to them. You bet!"

His blood had stirred quickly at the mention of the Robles Ranche, but the rest of Susy's speech was too much in the vein of her old extravagance to touch him seriously. He found himself only considering how strange it was that the old petulance and impulsiveness of her girlhood were actually bringing back with them her pink cheeks and brilliant eyes.

"You surely did n't ask Jim to bring me here," he said smilingly, "to tell me that Mrs. Peyton" — he corrected himself hastily as a malicious sparkle came into Susy's blue eyes — "that my wife was a Southern woman, and probably sympathized with her class? Well, I don't know that I should blame her for that any more than she should blame me for being a Northern man and a Unionist."

"And she does n't blame you?" asked Susy sneeringly.

The color came slightly to Clarence's cheek, but before he could reply the actress added,—

"No, she prefers to use you!"

"I don't think I understand you," said Clarence, rising coldly.

"No, you don't understand *her!*" retorted Susy sharply. "Look here, Clarence Brant, you 're right; I did n't ask you here to tell you — what you and everybody knows — that your wife is a Southerner. I did n't ask you here to tell you what everybody suspects — that she turns you round her little finger. But I did ask you here to tell you what nobody, not even you, suspects — but what *I* know! — and that is that she 's a *traitor* — and more, a *spy!* — and that I 've only got to say the word, or send that man Jim to say the word, to have her dragged out of her Copperhead den at Robles Ranche and shut up in Fort Alcatraz this very night!"

Still with the pink glowing in her rounding cheek, and eyes snapping like splintered sapphires, she rose to her feet, with her pretty shoulders lifted, her small hands and white teeth both tightly clenched, and took a step towards him. Even in her attitude there was a reminiscence of her willful childhood, although still blended with the provincial actress whom he had seen on the

stage only an hour ago. Thoroughly alarmed at her threat, in his efforts to conceal his feelings he was not above a weak retaliation. Stepping back, he affected to regard her with a critical admiration that was only half simulated, and said with a smile, —

"Very well done — but you have forgotten the flag."

She did not flinch. Rather accepting the sarcasm as a tribute to her art, she went on with increasing exaggeration: "No, it is *you* who have forgotten the flag — forgotten your country, your people, your manhood — everything for that high-toned, double-dyed old spy and traitress! For while you are standing here, your wife is gathering under her roof at Robles a gang of spies and traitors like herself — secession leaders and their bloated, drunken 'chivalry'! Yes, you may smile your superior smile, but I tell you, Clarence Brant, that with all your smartness and book learning you know no more of what goes on around you than a child. But others do! This conspiracy is known to the government, the Federal officers have been warned; General Sumner has been sent out here — and his first act was to

change the command at Fort Alcatraz, and send your wife's Southern friend — Captain Pinckney — to the right about! Yes — everything is known but *one* thing, and that is *where* and *how* this precious crew meet! That I alone know, and that I 've told you!"

"And I suppose," said Clarence, with an unchanged smile, "that this valuable information came from your husband — my old friend, Jim Hooker?"

"No," she answered sharply, "it comes from Cencho — one of your own peons — who is more true to you and the old Rancho than *you* have ever been. He saw what was going on, and came to me, to warn you!"

"But why not to me directly?" asked Clarence, with affected incredulity.

"Ask him!" she said viciously. "Perhaps he did n't want to warn the master against the mistress. Perhaps he thought *we* are still friends. Perhaps" — she hesitated with a lower voice and a forced smile — "perhaps he used to see us together in the old times."

"Very likely," said Clarence quietly. "And for the sake of those old times,

Susy," he went on, with a singular gentleness that was quite distinct from his paling face and set eyes, "I am going to forget all that you have just said of me and mine, in all the old willfulness and impatience that I see you still keep — with all your old prettiness." He took his hat from the table and gravely held out his hand.

She was frightened for a moment with his impassive abstraction. In the old days she had known it — had believed it was his dogged "obstinacy" — but she knew the hopelessness of opposing it. Yet with feminine persistency she again threw herself against it, as against a wall.

"You don't believe me! Well, go and see for yourself. They are at Robles *now*. If you catch the early morning stage at Santa Clara you will come upon them before they disperse. Dare you try it?"

"Whatever I do," he returned smilingly, "I shall always be grateful to you for giving me this opportunity of seeing you again *as you were*. Make my excuses to your husband. Good-night."

"Clarence!"

But he had already closed the door behind him. His face did not relax its expression

nor change as he looked again at the tray with its broken viands before the door, the worn, stained hall carpet, or the waiter who shuffled past him. He was apparently as critically conscious of them and of the close odors of the hall, and the atmosphere of listless decay and faded extravagance around him, as before the interview. But if the woman he had just parted from had watched him she would have supposed he still utterly disbelieved her story. Yet he was conscious that all that he saw was a part of his degradation, for he had believed every word she had uttered. Through all her extravagance, envy, and revengefulness he saw the central truth — that he had been deceived — not by his wife, but by himself! He had suspected all this before. This was what had been really troubling him — this was what he had put aside, rather than his faith, not in her, but in his ideal. He remembered letters that had passed between her and Captain Pinckney — letters that she had openly sent to notorious Southern leaders; her nervous anxiety to remain at the Rancho; the innuendoes and significant glances of friends which he had put aside — as he had this woman's message! Susy had

told him nothing new of his wife — but the truth of *himself!* And the revelation came from people who he was conscious were the inferiors of himself and his wife. To an independent, proud, and self-made man it was the culminating stroke.

In the same abstracted voice he told the coachman to drive home. The return seemed interminable — though he never shifted his position. Yet when he drew up at his own door and looked at his watch he found he had been absent only half an hour. Only half an hour! As he entered the house he turned with the same abstraction towards a mirror in the hall, as if he expected to see some outward and visible change in himself in that time. Dismissing his servants to bed, he went into his dressing-room, completely changed his attire, put on a pair of long riding-boots, and throwing a *serape* over his shoulders, paused a moment, took a pair of small "Derringer" pistols from a box, put them in his pockets, and then slipped cautiously down the staircase. A lack of confidence in his own domestics had invaded him for the first time. The lights were out. He silently opened the door and was in the street.

He walked hastily a few squares to a livery stable whose proprietor he knew. His first inquiry was for one "Redskin," a particular horse; the second for its proprietor. Happily both were in. The proprietor asked no question of a customer of Clarence's condition. The horse, half Spanish, powerful and irascible, was quickly saddled. As Clarence mounted, the man in an impulse of sociability said,—

"Saw you at the theatre to-night, sir."

"Ah," returned Clarence, quietly gathering up the reins.

"Rather a smart trick of that woman with the flag," he went on tentatively. Then, with a possible doubt of his customer's politics, he added with a forced smile, "I reckon it 's all party fuss, though; there ain't any real danger."

But fast as Clarence might ride the words lingered in his ears. He saw through the man's hesitation; he, too, had probably heard that Clarence Brant weakly sympathized with his wife's sentiments, and dared not speak fully. And he understood the cowardly suggestion that there was "no real danger." It had been Clarence's one fallacy. He had believed the public ex-

citement was only a temporary outbreak of partisan feeling, soon to subside. Even now he was conscious that he was less doubtful of the integrity of the Union than of his own household. It was not the devotion of the patriot, but the indignation of an outraged husband, that was spurring him on.

He knew that if he reached Woodville by five o'clock he could get ferried across the bay at the Embarcadero, and catch the down coach to Fair Plains, whence he could ride to the Rancho. As the coach did not connect directly with San Francisco, the chance of his surprising them was greater. Once clear of the city outskirts, he bullied Redskin into irascible speed, and plunged into the rainy darkness of the highroad. The way was familiar. For a while he was content to feel the buffeting, caused by his rapid pace, of wind and rain against his depressed head and shoulders in a sheer brutal sense of opposition and power, or to relieve his pent-up excitement by dashing through overflowed gullies in the road or across the quaggy, sodden edges of meadowland, until he had controlled Redskin's rebellious extravagance into a long steady stride. Then

he raised his head and straightened himself on the saddle, to think. But to no purpose. He had no plan; everything would depend upon the situation; the thought of forestalling any action of the conspirators, by warning or calling in the aid of the authorities, for an instant crossed his mind, but was as instantly dismissed. He had but an instinct — to see with his own eyes what his reason told him was true. Day was breaking through drifting scud and pewter-colored clouds as he reached Woodville ferry, checkered with splashes of the soil and the spume of his horse, from whose neck and flanks the sweat rolled like lather. Yet he was not conscious how intent had been his purpose until he felt a sudden instinctive shock on seeing that the ferryboat was gone. For an instant his wonderful self-possession abandoned him; he could only gaze vacantly at the leaden-colored bay, without a thought or expedient. But in another moment he saw that the boat was returning from the distance. Had he lost his only chance? He glanced hurriedly at his watch; he had come more quickly than he imagined; there would still be time. He beckoned impatiently to the ferryman; the

boat — a ship's pinnace, with two men in it — crept in with exasperating slowness. At last the two rowers suddenly leaped ashore.

"Ye might have come before, with the other passenger. We don't reckon to run lightnin' trips on this ferry."

But Clarence was himself again. "Twenty dollars for two more oars in that boat," he said quietly, "and fifty if you get me over in time to catch the down stage."

The man glanced at Clarence's eyes. "Run up and rouse out Jake and Sam," he said to the other boatman; then more leisurely, gazing at his customer's travel-stained equipment, he said, "There must have been a heap o' passengers got left by last night's boat. You 're the second man that took this route in a hurry."

At any other time the coincidence might have struck Clarence. But he only answered curtly, "Unless we are under way in ten minutes you will find I am *not* the second man, and that our bargain 's off."

But here two men emerged from the shanty beside the ferryhouse, and tumbled sleepily into the boat. Clarence seized an extra pair of sculls that were standing

against the shed, and threw them into the stern. "I don't mind taking a hand myself for exercise," he said quietly.

The ferryman glanced again at Clarence's travel-worn figure and determined eyes with mingled approval and surprise. He lingered a moment with his oars lifted, looking at his passenger. "It ain't no business o' mine, young man," he said deliberately, "but I reckon you understand me when I say that I 've just taken another man over there."

"I do," said Clarence impatiently.

"And you still want to go?"

"Certainly," replied Clarence, with a cold stare, taking up his oars.

The man shrugged his shoulders, bent himself for the stroke, and the boat sprung forward. The others rowed strongly and rapidly, the tough ashen blades springing like steel from the water, the heavy boat seeming to leap in successive bounds until they were fairly beyond the curving inshore current and clearing the placid, misty surface of the bay. Clarence did not speak, but bent abstractedly over his oar; the ferryman and his crew rowed in equal panting silence; a few startled ducks whirred before

them, but dropped again to rest. In half an hour they were at the Embarcadero. The time was fairly up. Clarence's eyes were eagerly bent for the first appearance of the stage-coach around the little promontory; the ferryman was as eagerly scanning the bare, empty street of the still sleeping settlement.

"I don't see him anywhere," said the ferryman with a glance, half of astonishment and half of curiosity, at his solitary passenger.

"See whom?" asked Clarence carelessly, as he handed the man his promised fee.

"The other man I ferried over to catch the stage. He must have gone on without waiting. You 're in luck, young fellow!"

"I don't understand you," said Clarence impatiently. "What has your previous passenger to do with me?"

"Well, I reckon you know best. He 's the kind of man, gin'rally speaking, that other men, in a pow'ful hurry, don't care to meet — and, az a rule, don't *foller* arter. It 's gin'rally the other way."

"What do you mean?" inquired Clarence sternly. "Of whom are you speaking?"

"The Chief of Police of San Francisco!"

CHAPTER II.

THE laugh that instinctively broke from Clarence's lips was so sincere and unaffected that the man was disconcerted, and at last joined in it, a little shamefacedly. The grotesque blunder of being taken as a fugitive from justice relieved Clarence's mind from its acute tension,— he was momentarily diverted,— and it was not until the boatman had departed, and he was again alone, that it seemed to have any collateral significance. Then an uneasy recollection of Susy's threat that she had the power to put his wife in Fort Alcatraz came across him. Could she have already warned the municipal authorities and this man? But he quickly remembered that any action from such a warning could only have been taken by the United States Marshal, and not by a civic official, and dismissed the idea.

Nevertheless, when the stage with its half-spent lamps still burning dimly against the morning light swept round the curve and

rolled heavily up to the rude shanty which served as coach-office, he became watchful. A single yawning individual in its doorway received a few letters and parcels, but Clarence was evidently the *only* waiting passenger. Any hope that he might have entertained that his mysterious predecessor would emerge from some seclusion at that moment was disappointed. As he entered the coach he made a rapid survey of his fellow-travelers, but satisfied himself that the stranger was not among them. They were mainly small traders or farmers, a miner or two, and apparently a Spanish-American of better degree and personality. Possibly the circumstance that men of this class usually preferred to travel on horseback and were rarely seen in public conveyances attracted his attention, and their eyes met more than once in mutual curiosity. Presently Clarence addressed a remark to the stranger in Spanish; he replied fluently and courteously, but at the next stopping-place he asked a question of the expressman in an unmistakable Missouri accent. Clarence's curiosity was satisfied; he was evidently one of those early American settlers who had been so long domiciled in Southern

California as to adopt the speech as well as the habiliments of the Spaniard.

The conversation fell upon the political news of the previous night, or rather seemed to be lazily continued from some previous, more excited discussion, in which one of the contestants — a red-bearded miner — had subsided into an occasional growl of surly dissent. It struck Clarence that the Missourian had been an amused auditor and even, judging from a twinkle in his eye, a mischievous instigator of the controversy. He was not surprised, therefore, when the man turned to him with a certain courtesy and said,—

"And what, sir, is the political feeling in *your* district?"

But Clarence was in no mood to be drawn out, and replied, almost curtly, that as he had come only from San Francisco, they were probably as well informed on that subject as himself. A quick and searching glance from the stranger's eye made him regret his answer, but in the silence that ensued the red-bearded miner, evidently still rankling at heart, saw his opportunity. Slapping his huge hands on his knees, and leaning far forward until he seemed to plunge his flam-

ing beard, like a firebrand, into the controversy, he said grimly,—

"Well, I kin tell you, gen'l'men, *this*. It ain't goin' to be no matter wot 's the *political feeling* here or thar — it ain't goin' to be no matter wot 's the State's rights and wot 's Fed'ral rights — it ain't goin' to be no question whether the gov'ment 's got the right to relieve its own soldiers that those Secesh is besieging in Fort Sumter or whether they have n't — but the first gun that 's fired at the flag blows the chains off every d——n nigger south of Mason and Dixon's line! You hear me! I 'm shoutin'! And whether you call yourselves 'Secesh' or 'Union' or 'Copperhead' or 'Peace men,' you 've got to face it!"

There was an angry start in one or two of the seats; one man caught at the swinging side-strap and half rose, a husky voice began, "It 's a d——d" — and then all as suddenly subsided. Every eye was turned to an insignificant figure in the back seat. It was a woman, holding a child on her lap, and gazing out of the window with her sex's profound unconcern in politics. Clarence understood the rude chivalry of the road well enough to comprehend that this

unconscious but omnipotent figure had more than once that day controlled the passions of the disputants. They dropped back weakly to their seats, and their mutterings rolled off in the rattle of the wheels. Clarence glanced at the Missourian; he was regarding the red-bearded miner with a singular curiosity.

The rain had ceased, but the afternoon shadows were deepening when they at last reached Fair Plains, where Clarence expected to take horse to the Rancho. He was astonished, however, to learn that all the horses in the stable were engaged, but remembering that some of his own stock were in pasturage with a tenant at Fair Plains, and that he should probably have a better selection, he turned his steps thither. Passing out of the stable-yard he recognized the Missourian's voice in whispered conversation with the proprietor, but the two men withdrew into the shadow as he approached. An ill-defined uneasiness came over him; he knew the proprietor, who also seemed to know the Missourian, and this evident avoidance of him was significant. Perhaps his reputation as a doubtful Unionist had preceded him, but this would not account for

their conduct in a district so strongly Southern in sympathy as Fair Plains. More impressed by the occurrence than he cared to admit, when at last, after some delay, he had secured his horse, and was once more in the saddle, he kept a sharp lookout for his quondam companion. But here another circumstance added to his suspicions : there was a main road leading to Santa Inez, the next town, and the Rancho, and this Clarence had purposely taken in order to watch the Missourian; but there was also a cut-off directly to the Rancho, known only to the habitués of the Rancho. After a few moments' rapid riding on a mustang much superior to any in the hotel stables, he was satisfied that the stranger must have taken the cut-off. Putting spurs to his horse he trusted still to precede him to the Rancho —if that were his destination.

As he dashed along the familiar road, by a strange perversity of fancy, instead of thinking of his purpose, he found himself recalling the first time he had ridden that way in the flush of his youth and hopefulness. The girl-sweetheart he was then going to rejoin was now the wife of another; the woman who had been her guardian was

now his own wife. He had accepted without a pang the young girl's dereliction, but it was through her revelation that he was now about to confront the dereliction of his own wife. And this was the reward of his youthful trust and loyalty! A bitter laugh broke from his lips. It was part of his still youthful self-delusion that he believed himself wiser and stronger for it.

It was quite dark when he reached the upper field or first terrace of the Rancho. He could see the white walls of the casa rising dimly out of the green sea of early wild grasses, like a phantom island. It was here that the cut-off joined the main road — now the only one that led to the casa. He was satisfied that no one could have preceded him from Fair Plains; but it was true that he must take precautions against his own discovery. Dismounting near a clump of willows, he unsaddled and unbridled his horse, and with a cut of the riata over its haunches sent it flying across the field in the direction of a band of feeding mustangs, which it presently joined. Then, keeping well in the shadow of a belt of shrub-oaks, he skirted the long lesser terraces of the casa, intending to approach the

house by way of the old garden and corral. A drizzling rain, occasionally driven by the wind into long, misty, curtain-like waves, obscured the prospect and favored his design. He reached the low adobe wall of the corral in safety; looking over he could detect, in spite of the darkness, that a number of the horses were of alien brands, and even recognized one or two from the Santa Inez district. The vague outline of buggies and carryalls filled the long shed beside the stables. There *was* company at the casa — so far Susy was right!

Nevertheless, lingering still by the wall of the old garden for the deepening of night, his nervous feverishness was again invaded and benumbed by sullen memories. There was the opening left by the old grille in the wall, behind which Mrs. Peyton stood on the morning when he thought he was leaving the ranch forever; where he had first clasped her in his arms, and stayed. A turn of the head, a moment's indecision, a single glance of a languorous eye, had brought this culmination. And now he stood again before that ruined grille, his house and lands, even his *name*, misused by a mad, scheming enthusiast, and himself a

creeping spy of his own dishonor! He turned with a bitter smile again to the garden. A few dark red Castilian roses still leaned forward and swayed in the wind with dripping leaves. It was here that the first morning of his arrival he had kissed Susy; the perfume and color of her pink skin came back to him with a sudden shock as he stood there; he caught at a flower, drew it towards him, inhaled its odor in a long breath that left him faint and leaning against the wall. Then again he smiled, but this time more wickedly — in what he believed his cynicism had sprung up the first instinct of revenge!

It was now dark enough for him to venture across the carriage road and make his way to the rear of the house. His first characteristic instinct had been to enter openly at his own front gate, but the terrible temptation to overhear and watch the conspiracy unobserved — that fascination common to deceived humanity to witness its own shame — had now grown upon him. He knew that a word or gesture of explanation, apology, appeal, or even terror from his wife would check his rage and weaken his purpose. His perfect knowledge of the

house and the security of its inmates would enable him from some obscure landing or gallery to participate in any secret conclave they might hold in the patio — the only place suitable for so numerous a rendezvous. The absence of light in the few external windows pointed to this central gathering. And he had already conceived his plan of entrance.

Gaining the rear wall of the casa he began cautiously to skirt its brambly base until he had reached a long, oven-like window half obliterated by a monstrous passion vine. It was the window of what had once been Mrs. Peyton's boudoir; the window by which he had once forced an entrance to the house when it was in the hands of squatters, the window from which Susy had signaled her Spanish lover, the window whose grating had broken the neck of Judge Peyton's presumed assassin. But these recollections no longer delayed him; the moment for action had arrived. He knew that since the tragedy the boudoir had been dismantled and shunned; the servants believed it to be haunted by the assassin's ghost. With the aid of the passion vine the ingress was easy; the interior window was open; the

rustle of dead leaves on the bare floor as he entered, and the whir of a frightened bird by his ear, told the story of its desolation and the source of the strange noises that had been heard there. The door leading to the corridor was lightly bolted, merely to keep it from rattling in the wind. Slipping the bolt with the blade of his pocket-knife he peered into the dark passage. The light streaming under a door to the left, and the sound of voices, convinced him that his conjecture was right, and the meeting was gathered on the broad balconies around the patio. He knew that a narrow gallery, faced with Venetian blinds to exclude the sun, looked down upon them. He managed to gain it without discovery; luckily the blinds were still down; between their slats, himself invisible, he could hear and see everything that occurred.

Yet even at this supreme moment the first thing that struck him was the almost ludicrous contrast between the appearance of the meeting and its tremendous object. Whether he was influenced by any previous boyish conception of a clouded and gloomy conspiracy he did not know, but he was for an instant almost disconcerted by the apparent

levity and festivity of the conclave. Decanters and glasses stood on small tables before them; nearly all were drinking and smoking. They comprised fifteen or twenty men, some of whose faces were familiar to him elsewhere as Southern politicians; a few, he was shocked to see, were well-known Northern Democrats. Occupying a characteristically central position was the famous Colonel Starbottle, of Virginia. Jaunty and youthful-looking in his mask-like, beardless face, expansive and dignified in his middle-aged port and carriage, he alone retained some of the importance — albeit slightly theatrical and affected — of the occasion. Clarence in his first hurried glance had not observed his wife, and for a moment had felt relieved; but as Colonel Starbottle arose at that moment, and with a studiously chivalrous and courtly manner turned to his right, he saw that she was sitting at the further end of the balcony, and that a man whom he recognized as Captain Pinckney was standing beside her. The blood quickly tightened around his heart, but left him cold and observant.

"It was seldom, indeed," remarked Colonel Starbottle, placing his fat fingers in

the frill of his shirt front, "that a movement like this was graced with the actual presence of a lofty, inspiring, yet delicate spirit — a Boadicea — indeed, he might say a Joan of Arc — in the person of their charming hostess, Mrs. Brant. Not only were they favored by her social and hospitable ministration, but by her active and enthusiastic coöperation in the glorious work they had in hand. It was through her correspondence and earnest advocacy that they were to be favored to-night with the aid and counsel of one of the most distinguished and powerful men in the Southern district of California, Judge Beeswinger, of Los Angeles. He had not the honor of that gentleman's personal acquaintance; he believed he was not far wrong in saying that this was also the misfortune of every gentleman present; but the name itself was a tower of strength. He would go further, and say that Mrs. Brant herself was personally unacquainted with him, but it was through the fervor, poetry, grace, and genius of her correspondence with that gentleman that they were to have the honor of his presence that very evening. It was understood that advices had been received of his

departure, and that he might be expected at Robles at any moment."

"But what proof have we of Judge Beeswinger's soundness?" said a lazy Southern voice at the conclusion of Colonel Starbottle's periods. "Nobody here seems to know him by sight: is it not risky to admit a man to our meeting whom we are unable to identify?"

"I reckon nobody but a fool or some prying mudsill of a Yankee would trust his skin here," returned another; "and if he did we 'd know what to do with him."

But Clarence's attention was riveted on his wife, and the significant speech passed him as unheeded as had the colonel's rhetoric. She was looking very handsome and slightly flushed, with a proud light in her eyes that he had never seen before. Absorbed in the discussion, she seemed to be paying little attention to Captain Pinckney as she rose suddenly to her feet.

"Judge Beeswinger will be attended here by Mr. MacNiel, of the Fair Plains Hotel, who will vouch for him and introduce him," she said in a clear voice, which rang with an imperiousness that Clarence well remembered. "The judge was to arrive by the

coach from Martinez to Fair Plains, and is due now."

"Is there no *gentleman* to introduce him? Must we take him on the word of a common trader — by Jove! a whiskey-seller?" continued the previous voice sneeringly.

"On the word of a lady, Mr. Brooks," said Captain Pinckney, with a slight gesture towards Mrs. Brant — "who answers for both."

Clarence had started slightly at his wife's voice and the information it conveyed. His fellow-passenger, and the confidant of MacNiel, was the man they were expecting! If they had recognized him, Clarence, would they not warn the company of his proximity? He held his breath as the sound of voices came from the outer gate of the courtyard. Mrs. Brant rose; at the same moment the gate swung open, and a man entered. It *was* the Missourian.

He turned with old-fashioned courtesy to the single woman standing on the balcony.

"My fair correspondent, I believe! I am Judge Beeswinger. Your agent, MacNiel, passed me through your guards at the gate, but I did not deem it advisable to bring him into this assembly of gentlemen with-

out your further consideration. I trust I was right."

The quiet dignity and self-possession, the quaint, old-fashioned colonial precision of speech, modified by a soft Virginian intonation, and, above all, some singular individuality of the man himself, produced a profound sensation, and seemed to suddenly give the gathering an impressiveness it had lacked before. For an instant Clarence forgot himself and his personal wrongs in the shock of indignation he felt at this potent addition to the ranks of his enemies. He saw his wife's eyes sparkle with pride over her acquisition, and noticed that Pinckney cast a disturbed glance at the newcomer.

The stranger ascended the few steps to the balcony and took Mrs. Brant's hand with profound courtesy. "Introduce me to my colleagues — distinctly and separately. It behooves a man at such a moment to know to whom he entrusts his life and honor, and the life and honor of his cause."

It was evidently no mere formal courtesy to the stranger. As he stepped forward along the balcony, and under Mrs. Brant's graceful guidance was introduced to each of the members, he not only listened with

scrupulous care and attention to the name and profession of each man, but bent upon him a clear, searching glance that seemed to photograph him in his memory. With two exceptions. He passed Colonel Starbottle's expanding shirt frill with a bow of elaborate precision, and said, "Colonel Starbottle's fame requires neither introduction nor explanation." He stopped before Captain Pinckney and paused.

"An officer of the United States army, I believe, sir?"

"Yes."

"Educated at West Point, I think, by the government, to whom you have taken the oath of allegiance?"

"Yes."

"Very good, sir," said the stranger, turning away.

"You have forgotten one other fact, sir," said Pinckney, with a slightly supercilious air.

"Indeed! What is it?"

"I am, first of all, a native of the State of South Carolina!"

A murmur of applause and approval ran round the balcony. Captain Pinckney smiled and exchanged glances with Mrs.

Brant, but the stranger quietly returned to the central table beside Colonel Starbottle. "I am not only an unexpected delegate to this august assembly, gentlemen," he began gravely, "but I am the bearer of perhaps equally unexpected news. By my position in the Southern district I am in possession of dispatches received only this morning by pony express. Fort Sumter has been besieged. The United States flag, carrying relief to the beleaguered garrison, has been fired upon by the State of South Carolina."

A burst of almost hysteric applause and enthusiasm broke from the assembly, and made the dim, vault-like passages and corridors of the casa ring. Cheer after cheer went up to the veiled gallery and the misty sky beyond. Men mounted on the tables and waved their hands frantically, and in the midst of this bewildering turbulence of sound and motion Clarence saw his wife mounted on a chair, with burning cheeks and flashing eyes, waving her handkerchief like an inspired priestess. Only the stranger, still standing beside Colonel Starbottle, remained unmoved and impassive. Then, with an imperative gesture, he demanded a sudden silence.

"Convincing and unanimous as this demonstration is, gentlemen," he began quietly, "it is my duty, nevertheless, to ask you if you have seriously considered the meaning of the news I have brought. It is my duty to tell you that it means civil war. It means the clash of arms between two sections of a mighty country; it means the disruption of friends, the breaking of family ties, the separation of fathers and sons, of brothers and sisters — even, perhaps, to the disseverment of husband and wife!"

"It means the sovereignty of the South — and the breaking of a covenant with low born traders and abolitionists," said Captain Pinckney.

"If there are any gentlemen present," continued the stranger, without heeding the interruption, "who have pledged this State to the support of the South in this emergency, or to the establishment of a Pacific republic in aid and sympathy with it, whose names are on this paper" — he lifted a sheet of paper lying before Colonel Starbottle — "but who now feel that the gravity of the news demands a more serious consideration of the purpose, they are at liberty to withdraw from the meeting, giving their

honor, as Southern gentlemen, to keep the secret intact."

"Not if I know it," interrupted a stalwart Kentuckian, as he rose to his feet and strode down the steps to the patio. "For," he added, placing his back against the gateway, "I 'll shoot the first coward that backs out now."

A roar of laughter and approval followed, but was silenced again by the quiet, unimpassioned voice of the stranger. "If, on the other hand," he went on calmly, "you all feel that this news is the fitting culmination and consecration of the hopes, wishes, and plans of this meeting, you will assert it again, over your own signatures, to Colonel Starbottle at this table."

When the Kentuckian had risen, Clarence had started from his concealment; when he now saw the eager figures pressing forward to the table he hesitated no longer. Slipping along the passage, he reached the staircase which led to the corridor in the rear of the balcony. Descending this rapidly, he not only came upon the backs of the excited crowd around the table, but even elbowed one of the conspirators aside without being noticed. His wife, who had risen

from her chair at the end of the balcony, was already moving towards the table. With a quick movement he seized her wrist, and threw her back in the chair again. A cry broke from her lips as she recognized him, but still holding her wrist, he stepped quickly between her and the astonished crowd. There was a moment of silence, then the cry of "Spy!" and "Seize him!" rose quickly, but above all the voice and figure of the Missourian was heard commanding them to stand back. Turning to Clarence, he said quietly,—

"I should know your face, sir. Who are you?"

"The husband of this woman and the master of this house," said Clarence as quietly, but in a voice he hardly recognized as his own.

"Stand aside from her, then — unless you are hoping that her danger may protect *you!*" said the Kentuckian, significantly drawing his revolver.

But Mrs. Brant sprang suddenly to her feet beside Clarence.

"We are neither of us cowards, Mr. Brooks — though he speaks the truth — and — more shame to me" — she added, with a

look of savage scorn at Clarence — "*is my husband!*"

"What is your purpose in coming here?" continued Judge Beeswinger, with his eyes fixed on Clarence.

"I have given you all the information," said Clarence quietly, "that is necessary to make you, as a gentleman, leave this house at once — and that is my purpose. It is all the information you will get from me as long as you and your friends insult my roof with your uninvited presence. What I may have to say to you and each of you hereafter — what I may choose to demand of you, according to your own code of honor," — he fixed his eyes on Captain Pinckney's, — "is another question, and one not usually discussed before a lady."

"Pardon me. A moment — a single moment."

It was the voice of Colonel Starbottle; it was the frilled shirt front, the lightly buttoned blue coat with its expanding lapels, like bursting petals, and the smiling mask of that gentleman rising above the table and bowing to Clarence Brant and his wife with infinite courtesy. "The — er — humiliating situation in which we find ourselves, gentle-

men,— the reluctant witnesses of — er — what we trust is only a temporary disagreement between our charming hostess and the — er — gentleman whom she recognized under the highest title to our consideration, — is distressing to us all, and would seem to amply justify that gentleman's claims to a personal satisfaction, which I know we would all delight to give. But that situation rests upon the supposition that our gathering here was of a purely social or festive nature! It may be," continued the colonel with a blandly reflective air, "that the spectacle of these decanters and glasses, and the nectar furnished us by our Hebe-like hostess" (he lifted a glass of whiskey and water to his lips while he bowed to Mrs. Brant gracefully), "has led the gentleman to such a deduction. But when I suggest to him that our meeting was of a business, or private nature, it strikes me that the question of intrusion may be fairly divided between him and ourselves. We may be even justified, in view of that privacy, in asking him if his — er — entrance to this house was — er — coincident with his appearance among us."

"With my front door in possession of

strangers," said Clarence, more in reply to a sudden contemptuous glance from his wife than Starbottle's insinuation, "I entered the house through the window."

"Of my boudoir, where another intruder once broke his neck," interrupted his wife with a mocking laugh.

"Where I once helped this lady to regain possession of her house when it was held by another party of illegal trespassers, who, however, were content to call themselves 'jumpers,' and did not claim the privacy of gentlemen."

"Do you mean to imply, sir," began Colonel Starbottle haughtily, "that" —

"I mean to imply, sir," said Clarence with quiet scorn, "that I have neither the wish to know nor the slightest concern in any purpose that brought you here, and that when you quit the house you take your secrets and your privacy with you intact, without let or hindrance from me."

"Do you mean to say, Mr. Brant," said Judge Beeswinger, suppressing the angry interruption of his fellows with a dominant wave of his hand, as he fixed his eyes on Clarence keenly, "that you have no sympathy with your wife's political sentiments?"

"I have already given you the information necessary to make you quit this house, and that is all you have a right to know," returned Clarence with folded arms.

"But *I* can answer for him," said Mrs. Brant, rising, with a quivering voice and curling lip. "There *is* no sympathy between us. We are as far apart as the poles. We have nothing in common but this house and his name."

"But you are husband and wife, bound together by a sacred compact."

"A compact!" echoed Mrs. Brant, with a bitter laugh. "Yes, the compact that binds South Carolina to the nigger-worshiping Massachusetts. The compact that links together white and black, the gentleman and the trader, the planter and the poor white — the compact of those *United* States. Bah! *that* has been broken, and so can this."

Clarence's face paled. But before he could speak there was a rapid clattering at the gate and a dismounted vaquero entered excitedly. Turning to Mrs. Brant he said hurriedly, "Mother of God! the casa is surrounded by a rabble of mounted men, and there is one among them even now who

demands admittance in the name of the Law."

"This is your work," said Brooks, facing Clarence furiously. "You have brought them with you, but, by God, they shall not save you!" He would have clutched Clarence, but the powerful arm of Judge Beeswinger intervened. Nevertheless, he still struggled to reach Clarence, appealing to the others: "Are you fools to stand there and let him triumph! Don't you see the cowardly Yankee trick he's played upon us?"

"He has not," said Mrs. Brant haughtily. "I have no reason to love him or his friends; but I know he does not lie."

"Gentlemen! — gentlemen!" implored Colonel Starbottle with beaming and unctuous persuasion, "may I — er — remark — that all this is far from the question? Are we to be alarmed because an unknown rabble, no matter whence they come, demand entrance here in the name of the Law? I am not aware of any law of the State of California that we are infringing. By all means admit them."

The gate was thrown open. A single thick-set man, apparently unarmed and

dressed like an ordinary traveler, followed by half a dozen other equally unpretentious-looking men, entered. The leader turned to the balcony.

"I am the Chief of Police of San Francisco. I have warrants for the arrest of Colonel Culpepper Starbottle, Joshua Brooks, Captain Pinckney, Clarence Brant and Alice his wife, and others charged with inciting to riot and unlawful practice calculated to disturb the peace of the State of California and its relations with the Federal government," said the leader, in a dry official voice.

Clarence started. In spite of its monotonous utterance it was the voice of the red-bearded controversialist of the stage-coach. But where were his characteristic beard and hair? Involuntarily Clarence glanced at Judge Beeswinger; that gentleman was quietly regarding the stranger with an impassive face that betrayed no recognition whatever.

"But the city of San Francisco has no jurisdiction here," said Colonel Starbottle, turning a bland smile towards his fellow-members. "I am — er — sorry to inform you that you are simply trespassing, sir."

"I am here also as deputy sheriff," returned the stranger coolly. "We were unable to locate the precise place of this meeting, although we knew of its existence. I was sworn in this morning at Santa Inez by the judge of this district, and these gentlemen with me are my posse."

There was a quick movement of resistance by the members, which was, however, again waived blandly aside by Colonel Starbottle. Leaning forward in a slightly forensic attitude, with his fingers on the table and a shirt frill that seemed to have become of itself erectile, he said, with pained but polite precision, "I grieve to have to state, sir, that even that position is utterly untenable here. I am a lawyer myself, as my friend here, Judge Beeswinger — eh? I beg your pardon!"

The officer of the law had momentarily started, with his eyes fixed on Judge Beeswinger, who, however, seemed to be quietly writing at the table.

"As Judge Beeswinger," continued Colonel Starbottle, "will probably tell you; and as a jurist himself, he will also probably agree with me when I also inform you that, as the United States government is

an aggrieved party, it is a matter for the Federal courts to prosecute, and that the only officer we can recognize is the United States Marshal for the district. When I add that the marshal, Colonel Crackenthorpe, is one of my oldest friends, and an active sympathizer with the South in the present struggle, you will understand that any action from him in this matter is exceedingly improbable."

The general murmur of laughter, relief, and approval was broken by the quiet voice of Judge Beeswinger.

"Let me see your warrant, Mr. Deputy Sheriff."

The officer approached him with a slightly perplexed and constrained air, and exhibited the paper. Judge Beeswinger handed it back to him. "Colonel Starbottle is quite right in his contention," he said quietly; "the only officer that this assembly can recognize is the United States Marshal or his legal deputy. But Colonel Starbottle is wrong in his supposition that Colonel Crackenthorpe still retains the functions of that office. He was removed by the President of the United States, and his successor was appointed and sworn in by the Federal judge

early this morning." He paused, and folding up the paper on which he had been writing, placed it in the hands of the deputy. "And this," he continued in the same even voice, "constitutes you his deputy, and will enable you to carry out your duty in coming here."

"What the devil does this mean, sir? Who are you?" gasped Colonel Starbottle, recoiling suddenly from the man at his side.

"I am the new United States Marshal for the Southern District of California."

CHAPTER III.

Unsuspected and astounding as the revelation was to Clarence, its strange reception by the conspirators seemed to him as astounding. He had started forward, half expecting that the complacent and self-confessed spy would be immolated by his infuriated dupes. But to his surprise the shock seemed to have changed their natures, and given them the dignity they had lacked. The excitability, irritation, and recklessness which had previously characterized them had disappeared. The deputy and his posse, who had advanced to the assistance of their revealed chief, met with no resistance. They had evidently, as if with one accord, drawn away from Judge Beeswinger, leaving a cleared space around him, and regarded their captors with sullen contemptuous silence. It was only broken by Colonel Starbottle: —

"Your duty commands you, sir, to use all possible diligence in bringing us before

the Federal judge of this district — unless your master in Washington has violated the Constitution so far as to remove him, too!"

"I understand you perfectly," returned Judge Beeswinger, with unchanged composure; "and as you know that Judge Wilson unfortunately cannot be removed except through a regular course of impeachment, I suppose you may still count upon his Southern sympathies to befriend you. With that I have nothing to do; my duty is complete when my deputy has brought you before him and I have stated the circumstances of the arrest."

"I congratulate you, sir," said Captain Pinckney, with an ironical salute, "on your prompt reward for your treachery to the South, and your equally prompt adoption of the peculiar tactics of your friends in the way in which you have entered this house."

"I am sorry I cannot congratulate *you*, sir," returned Judge Beeswinger gravely, "on breaking your oath to the government which has educated and supported you and given you the epaulettes you disgrace. Nor shall I discuss 'treachery' with the man who has not only violated the trust of his country, but even the integrity of his

friend's household. It is for that reason that I withhold the action of this warrant in so far as it affects the persons of the master and mistress of this home. I am satisfied that Mr. Brant has been as ignorant of what has been done here as I am that his wife has been only the foolish dupe of a double traitor!"

"Silence!"

The words broke simultaneously from the lips of Clarence and Captain Pinckney. They stood staring at each other — the one pale, the other crimson — as Mrs. Brant, apparently oblivious of the significance of their united adjuration, turned to Judge Beeswinger in the fury of her still stifled rage and mortification.

"Keep your mercy for your fellow-spy," she said, with a contemptuous gesture towards her husband; "*I* go with these gentlemen!"

"You will not," said Clarence quietly, "until I have said a word to you alone." He laid his hand firmly upon her wrist.

The deputy and his prisoners filed slowly out of the courtyard together, the latter courteously saluting Mrs. Brant as they passed, but turning from Judge Beeswinger

in contemptuous silence. The judge followed them to the gate, but there he paused. Turning to Mrs. Brant, who was still half struggling in the strong grip of her husband, he said, —

"Any compunction I may have had in misleading you by accepting your invitation here I dismissed after I had entered this house. And I trust," he added, turning to Clarence sternly, "I leave you the master of it!"

As the gate closed behind him, Clarence locked it. When his wife turned upon him angrily, he said quietly, —

"I have no intention of restraining your liberty a moment after our interview is over, but until then I do not intend to be disturbed."

She threw herself disdainfully back in her chair, her hands clasped in her lap in half-contemptuous resignation, with her eyes upon her long slim arched feet crossed before her. Even in her attitude there was something of her old fascination which, however, now seemed to sting Clarence to the quick.

"I have nothing to say to you in regard to what has just passed in this house, except

that as long as I remain even nominally its master it shall not be repeated. Although I shall no longer attempt to influence or control your political sympathies, I shall not allow you to indulge them where in any way they seem to imply my sanction. But so little do I oppose your liberty, that you are free to rejoin your political companions whenever you choose to do so on your own responsibility. But I must first know from your own lips whether your sympathies are purely political — or a name for something else?"

She had alternately flushed and paled, although still keeping her scornful attitude as he went on, but there was no mistaking the genuineness of her vague wonderment at his concluding words.

"I don't understand you," she said, lifting her eyes to his in a moment of cold curiosity. "What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? What did Judge Beeswinger mean when he called Captain Pinckney a double traitor?" he said roughly.

She sprang to her feet with flashing eyes. "And you — *you!* dare to repeat the cowardly lie of a confessed spy. This, then, is what you wished to tell me — this the insult

for which you have kept me here; because you are incapable of understanding unselfish patriotism or devotion — even to your own cause — you dare to judge me by your own base, Yankee-trading standards. Yes, it is worthy of you!" She walked rapidly up and down, and then suddenly faced him. "I understand it all; I appreciate your magnanimity now. You are willing I should join the company of these chivalrous gentlemen in order to give color to your calumnies! Say at once that it was you who put up this spy to correspond with me — to come here — in order to entrap me. Yes! entrap me — I — who a moment ago stood up for you before these gentlemen, and said you could not lie. Bah!"

Struck only by the wild extravagance of her speech and temper, Clarence did not know that when women are most illogical they are apt to be most sincere, and from a man's standpoint her unreasoning deductions appeared to him only as an affectation to gain time for thought, or a theatrical display, like Susy's. And he was turning half contemptuously away, when she again faced him with flashing eyes.

"Well, hear me! I accept; I leave here

at once, to join my own people, my own friends — those who understand me — put what construction on it that you choose. Do your worst; you cannot do more to separate us than you have done just now."

She left him, and ran up the steps with a singular return of her old occasional nymph-like nimbleness — the movement of a woman who had never borne children — and a swish of her long skirts that he remembered for many a day after, as she disappeared in the corridor. He remained looking after her — indignant, outraged, and unconvinced. There was a rattling at the gate.

He remembered he had locked it. He opened it to the flushed pink cheeks and dancing eyes of Susy. The rain was still dripping from her wet cloak as she swung it from her shoulders.

"I know it all! — all that 's happened," she burst out with half-girlish exuberance and half the actress's declamation. "We met them all in the road — posse and prisoners. Chief Thompson knew me and told me all. And so you 've done it — and you 're master in your old house again. Clarence, old boy! Jim said you would n't do it — said you 'd weaken on account of

her! But I said 'No.' I knew you better, old Clarence, and I saw it in your face, for all your stiffness! ha! But for all that I was mighty nervous and uneasy, and I just made Jim send an excuse to the theatre and we rushed it down here! Lordy! but it looks natural to see the old house again! And she — you packed her off with the others — did n't you? Tell me, Clarence," in her old appealing voice, "you shook her, too!"

Dazed and astounded, and yet experiencing a vague sense of relief with something like his old tenderness towards the willful woman before him, he had silently regarded her until her allusion to his wife recalled him to himself.

"Hush!" he said quickly, with a glance towards the corridor.

"Ah!" said Susy, with a malicious smile, "then that 's why Captain Pinckney was lingering in the rear with the deputy."

"Silence!" repeated Clarence sternly. "Go in there," pointing to the garden room below the balcony, "and wait there with your husband."

He half led, half pushed her into the room which had been his business office, and

returned to the patio. A hesitating voice from the balcony said, "Clarence!"

It was his wife's voice, but modified and gentler — more like her voice as he had first heard it, or as if it had been chastened by some reminiscence of those days. It was his wife's face, too, that looked down on his — paler than he had seen it since he entered the house. She was shawled and hooded, carrying a traveling-bag in her hand.

"I am going, Clarence," she said, pausing before him, with gentle gravity, "but not in anger. I even ask you to forgive me for the foolish words that I think your still more foolish accusation" — she smiled faintly — "dragged from me. I am going because I know that I have brought — and that while I am here I shall always be bringing — upon you the imputation and even the responsibility of my own faith! While I am proud to own it, — and if needs be suffer for it, — I have no right to ruin your prospects, or even make you the victim of the slurs that others may cast upon me. Let us part as friends — separated only by our different political faiths, but keeping all other faiths together — until God shall

settle the right of this struggle. Perhaps it may be soon — I sometimes think it may be years of agony for all; but until then, good-by."

She had slowly descended the steps to the patio, looking handsomer than he had ever seen her, and as if sustained and upheld by the enthusiasm of her cause. Her hand was outstretched towards his — his heart beat violently — in another moment he might have forgotten all and clasped her to his breast. Suddenly she stopped, her outstretched arm stiffened, her finger pointed to the chair on which Susy's cloak was hanging.

"What 's that?" she said in a sharp, high, metallic voice. "Who is here? Speak!"

"Susy," said Clarence.

She cast a scathing glance round the patio, and then settled her piercing eyes on Clarence with a bitter smile.

"Already!"

Clarence felt the blood rush to his face as he stammered, "She knew what was happening here, and came to give you warning."

"Liar!"

"Stop!" said Clarence, with a white face,

"She came to tell me that Captain Pinckney was still lingering for you in the road."

He threw open the gate to let her pass. As she swept out she lifted her hand. As he closed the gate there were the white marks of her four fingers on his cheek.

CHAPTER IV.

For once Susy had not exaggerated. Captain Pinckney *was* lingering, with the deputy who had charge of him, on the trail near the casa. It had already been pretty well understood by both captives and captors that the arrest was simply a legal demonstration; that the sympathizing Federal judge would undoubtedly order the discharge of the prisoners on their own recognizances, and it was probable that the deputy saw no harm in granting Pinckney's request — which was virtually only a delay in his liberation. It was also possible that Pinckney had worked upon the chivalrous sympathies of the man by professing his disinclination to leave their devoted colleague, Mrs. Brant, at the mercy of her antagonistic and cold-blooded husband at such a crisis, and it is to be feared also that Clarence, as a reputed lukewarm partisan, excited no personal sympathy, even from his own party. Howbeit, the deputy agreed to delay

Pinckney's journey for a parting interview with his fair hostess.

How far this expressed the real sentiments of Captain Pinckney was never known. Whether his political association with Mrs. Brant had developed into a warmer solicitude, understood or ignored by her, — what were his hopes and aspirations regarding her future, — were by the course of fate never disclosed. A man of easy ethics, but rigid artificialities of honor, flattered and pampered by class prejudice, a so-called "man of the world," with no experience beyond his own limited circle, yet brave and devoted to that, it were well perhaps to leave this last act of his inefficient life as it was accepted by the deputy.

Dismounting he approached the house from the garden. He was already familiar with the low arched doorway which led to the business room, and from which he could gain admittance to the patio, but it so chanced that he entered the dark passage at the moment that Clarence had thrust Susy into the business room, and heard its door shut sharply. For an instant he believed that Mrs. Brant had taken refuge there, but as he cautiously moved forward

he heard her voice in the patio beyond. Its accents struck him as pleading; an intense curiosity drew him further along the passage. Suddenly her voice seemed to change to angry denunciation, and the word "Liar" rang upon his ears. It was followed by his own name uttered sardonically by Clarence, the swift rustle of a skirt, the clash of the gate, and then — forgetting everything, he burst into the patio.

Clarence was just turning from the gate with the marks of his wife's hand still red on his white cheek. He saw Captain Pinckney's eyes upon it, and the faint, half-malicious, half-hysteric smile upon his lips. But without a start or gesture of surprise he locked the gate, and turning to him, said with frigid significance, —

"I thank you for returning so promptly, and for recognizing the only thing I now require at your hand."

But Captain Pinckney had recovered his supercilious ease with the significant demand.

"You seem to have had something already from another's hand, sir, but I am at your service," he said lightly.

"You will consider that I have accepted it from you," said Clarence, drawing closer

to him with a rigid face. "I suppose it will not be necessary for me to return it — to make you understand me."

"Go on," said Pinckney, flushing slightly. "Make your terms; I am ready."

"But I 'm not," said the unexpected voice of the deputy at the grille of the gateway. "Excuse my interfering, gentlemen, but this sort o' thing ain't down in my schedule. I 've let this gentleman," pointing to Captain Pinckney, "off for a minit to say 'good-by' to a lady, who I reckon has just ridden off in her buggy with her servant without saying by your leave, but I did n't calkelate to let him inter another business, which, like as not, may prevent me from delivering his body safe and sound into court. You hear me!" As Clarence opened the gate he added, "I don't want ter spoil sport between gents, but it 's got to come in after I 've done my duty."

"I 'll meet you, sir, anywhere, and with what weapons you choose," said Pinckney, turning angrily upon Clarence, "as soon as this farce — for which you and your friends are responsible — is over." He was furious at the intimation that Mrs. Brant had escaped him.

A different thought was in the husband's mind. "But what assurance have I that you are going on with the deputy?" he said with purposely insulting deliberation.

"My word, sir," said Captain Pinckney sharply.

"And if that ain't enuff, there 's mine!" said the deputy. "For if this gentleman swerves to the right or left betwixt this and Santa Inez, I 'll blow a hole through him myself. And that," he added deprecatingly, "is saying a good deal for a man who does n't want to spoil sport, and for the matter of that is willing to stand by and see fair play done at Santa Inez any time to-morrow before breakfast."

"Then I can count on you," said Clarence, with a sudden impulse extending his hand.

The man hesitated a moment and then grasped it.

"Well, I was n't expecting that," he said slowly; "but you look as if you meant business, and if you ain't got anybody else to see you through, I 'm thar! I suppose this gentleman will have his friends."

"I shall be there at six with my seconds," said Pinckney curtly. "Lead on."

The gate closed behind them. Clarence stood looking around the empty patio and the silent house, from which it was now plain that the servants had been withdrawn to insure the secrecy of the conspiracy. Cool and collected as he knew he was, he remained for a moment in hesitation. Then the sound of voices came to his ear from the garden room, the light frivolity of Susy's laugh and Hooker's huskier accents. He had forgotten they were there — he had forgotten their existence!

Trusting still to his calmness, he called to Hooker in his usual voice. That gentleman appeared with a face which his attempts to make unconcerned and impassive had, however, only deepened into funereal gravity.

"I have something to attend to," said Clarence, with a faint smile, "and I must ask you and Susy to excuse me for a little while. She knows the house perfectly, and will call the servants from the annex to provide you both with refreshment until I join you a little later." Satisfied from Hooker's manner that they knew nothing of his later interview with Pinckney, he turned away and ascended to his own room.

There he threw himself into an armchair by the dim light of a single candle as if to reflect. But he was conscious, even then, of his own calmness and want of excitement, and that no reflection was necessary. What he had done and what he intended to do was quite clear; there was no alternative suggested or to be even sought after. He had that sense of relief which comes with the climax of all great struggles, even of defeat.

He had never known before how hopeless and continuous had been that struggle until now it was over. He had no fear of to-morrow; he would meet it as he had to-day, with the same singular consciousness of being equal to the occasion. There was even no necessity of preparation for it; his will, leaving his fortune to his wife, — which seemed a slight thing now in this greater separation, — was already in his safe in San Francisco; his pistols were in the next room. He was even slightly disturbed by his own insensibility, and passed into his wife's bedroom partly in the hope of disturbing his serenity by some memento of their past. There was no disorder of flight — everything was in its place, except the drawer of

her desk, which was still open, as if she had taken something from it as an afterthought. There were letters and papers there, some of his own and some in Captain Pinckney's handwriting. It did not occur to him to look at them — even to justify himself, or excuse her. He knew that his hatred of Captain Pinckney was not so much that he believed him her lover, as his sudden conviction that she was like him! He was the male of her species — a being antagonistic to himself, whom he could fight, and crush, and revenge himself upon. But most of all he loathed his past, not on account of her, but of his own weakness that had made him her dupe and a misunderstood man to his friends. He had been derelict of duty in his unselfish devotion to her; he had stifled his ambition, and underrated his own possibilities. No wonder that others had accepted him at his own valuation. Clarence Brant was a modest man, but the egotism of modesty is more fatal than that of pretension, for it has the haunting consciousness of superior virtue.

He reëntered his own room and again threw himself into his chair. His calm was being succeeded by a physical weariness; he

remembered he had not slept the night before, and he ought to take some rest to be fresh in the early morning. Yet he must also show himself before his self-invited guests, — Susy and her husband, — or their suspicions would be aroused. He would try to sleep for a little while in the chair before he went downstairs again. He closed his eyes oddly enough on a dim dreamy recollection of Susy in the old days, in the little madroño hollow where she had once given him a rendezvous. He forgot the maturer and critical uneasiness with which he had then received her coquettish and willful advances, which he now knew was the effect of the growing dominance of Mrs. Peyton over him, and remembered only her bright, youthful eyes, and the kisses he had pressed upon her soft fragrant cheek. The faintness he had felt when waiting in the old rose garden, a few hours ago, seemed to steal on him once more, and to lapse into a pleasant drowsiness. He even seemed again to inhale the perfume of the roses.

"Clarence!"

He started. He had been sleeping, but the voice sounded strangely real.

A light, girlish laugh followed. He sprang

to his feet. It was Susy standing beside him — and Susy even as she looked in the old days!

For with a flash of her old audacity, aided by her familiar knowledge of the house and the bunch of household keys she had found, which dangled from her girdle, as in the old fashion, she had disinterred one of her old frocks from a closet, slipped it on, and unloosening her brown hair had let it fall in rippling waves down her back. It was Susy in her old girlishness, with the instinct of the grown actress in the arrangement of her short skirt over her pretty ankles and the half-conscious pose she had taken.

"Poor dear old Clarence," she said, with dancing eyes; "I might have won a dozen pairs of gloves from you while you slept there. But you 're tired, dear old boy, and you 've had a hard time of it. No matter; you 've shown yourself a man at last, and I 'm proud of you."

Half ashamed of the pleasure he felt even in his embarrassment, Clarence stammered, "But this change — this dress."

Susy clapped her hands like a child. "I knew it would surprise you! It 's an old frock I wore the year I went away with

auntie. I knew where it was hidden, and fished it out again with these keys, Clarence; it seemed so like old times. Lord! when I was with the old servants again, and you did n't come down, I just felt as if I 'd never been away, and I just rampaged free. It seemed to me, don't you know, not as if I 'd just come, but as if I 'd always been right here, and it was you who 'd just come. Don't you understand! Just as you came when me and Mary Rogers were here; don't you remember her, Clarence, and how she used to do 'gooseberry' for us? Well, just like that. So I said to Jim, 'I don't know you any more — get!' and I just slipped on this frock and ordered Manuela around as I used to do — and she in fits of laughter; I reckon, Clarence, she has n't laughed as much since I left. And then I thought of you — perhaps worried and flustered as yet over things, and the change, and I just slipped into the kitchen and I told old fat Conchita to make some of these tortillas you know, — with sugar and cinnamon sprinkled on top, — and I tied on an apron and brought 'em up to you on a tray with a glass of that old Catalan wine you used to like. Then I sorter felt frightened when I

got here, and I did n't hear any noise, and I put the tray down in the hall and peeped in and found you asleep. Sit still, I 'll fetch 'em."

She tripped out into the passage, returning with the tray, which she put on the table beside Clarence, and then standing back a little and with her hands tucked soubrette fashion in the tiny pockets of her apron, gazed at him with a mischievous smile.

It was impossible not to smile back as he nibbled the crisp Mexican cake and drank the old mission wine. And Susy's tongue trilled an accompaniment to his thanks.

"Lord! it seems so nice to be here — just you and me, Clarence — like in the old days — with nobody naggin' and swoopin' round after you. Don't be greedy, Clarence, but give me a cake." She took one and finished the dregs of his glass.

Then sitting on the arm of his chair, she darted a violet ray of half reproach and half mischievousness into his amused and retrospective eyes. "There used to be room for two in that chair, Klarns."

The use of the old childish diminutive for his name seemed to him natural as her familiarity, and he moved a little sideways

to make room for her with an instinct of pleasure, but the same sense of irresponsibility that had characterized his reflections. Nevertheless, he looked critically into the mischievous eyes, and said quietly, —

"Where is your husband?"

There was no trace of embarrassment, apology, or even of consciousness in her pretty face as she replied, passing her hand lightly through his hair, —

"Oh, Jim? I 've packed him off!"

"Packed him off!" echoed Clarence, slightly astonished.

"Yes, to Fair Plains, full tilt after your wife's buggy. You see, Clarence, after the old cat — that 's your wife, please — left, I wanted to make sure she had gone, and was n't hangin' round to lead you off again with your leg tied to her apron string like a chicken's! No! I said to Jim, 'Just you ride after her until you see she 's safe and sound in the down coach from Fair Plains without her knowin' it, and if she 's inclined to hang back or wobble any, you post back here and let me know!' I told him I would stay and look after you to see you did n't bolt too!" She laughed, and then added, "But I did n't think I should fall into the

old ways so soon, and have such a nice time. Did you, Clarence?"

She looked so irresponsible, sitting there with her face near his, and so childishly, or perhaps thoughtlessly, happy, that he could only admire her levity, and even the slight shock that her flippant allusion to his wife had given him seemed to him only a weakness of his own. After all, was not hers the true philosophy? Why should not these bright eyes see things more clearly than his own? Nevertheless, with his eyes still fixed upon them, he continued, —

"And Jim was willing to go?"

She stopped, with her fingers still lifting a lock of his hair. "Why, yes, you silly — why should n't he? I 'd like to see him refuse. Why, Lord! Jim will do anything I ask him." She put down the lock of hair, and suddenly looking full into his eyes, said, "That 's just the difference between him and me, and you and — that woman!"

"Then you love him!"

"About as much as you love her," she said, with an unaffected laugh; "only he don't wind me around his finger."

No doubt she was right for all her thoughtlessness, and yet he was going to fight about

that woman to-morrow! No — he forgot; he was going to fight Captain Pinckney because he was like her!

Susy had put her finger on the crease between his brows which this supposition had made, and tried to rub it out.

"You know it as well as I do, Clarence," she said, with a pretty wrinkling of her own brows, which was her nearest approach to thoughtfulness. "You know you never really liked her, only you thought her ways were grander and more proper than mine, and you know you were always a little bit of a snob and a prig too — dear boy. And Mrs. Peyton was — bless my soul! — a Benham and a planter's daughter, and I — I was only a picked-up orphan! That 's where Jim is better than you — now sit still, goosey! — even if I don't like him as much. Oh, I know what you 're always thinking, you 're thinking we 're both exaggerated and theatrical, ain't you? But don't you think it 's a heap better to be exaggerated and theatrical about things that are just sentimental and romantic than to be so awfully possessed and overcome about things that are only real? There, you need n't stare at me so! It 's true. You 've had your

fill of grandeur and propriety, and — here you are. And," she added with a little chuckle, as she tucked up her feet and leaned a little closer to him, "here 's *me.*"

He did not speak, but his arm quite unconsciously passed round her small waist.

"You see, Clarence," she went on with equal unconsciousness of the act, "you ought never to have let me go — never ! You ought to have kept me here — or run away with me. And you ought n't to have tried to make me proper. And you ought n't to have driven me to flirt with that horrid Spaniard, and you ought n't to have been so horribly cold and severe when I did. And you ought n't to have made me take up with Jim, who was the only one who thought me his equal. I might have been very silly and capricious; I might have been very vain, but my vanity is n't a bit worse than your pride; my love of praise and applause in the theatre is n't a bit more horrid than your fears of what people might think of you or me. That 's gospel truth, is n't it, Clarence? Tell me! Don't look that way and this — look at *me!* I ain't poisonous, Clarence. Why, one of your cheeks is redder than the other, Clarence; that 's the one

that 's turned from me. Come," she went on, taking the lapels of his coat between her hands and half shaking him, half drawing him nearer her bright face. "Tell me — is n't it true?"

"I was thinking of you just now when I fell asleep, Susy," he said. He did not know why he said it; he had not intended to tell her, he had only meant to avoid a direct answer to her question; yet even now he went on. "And I thought of you when I was out there in the rose garden waiting to come in here."

"You did?" she said, drawing in her breath. A wave of delicate pink color came up to her very eyes, it seemed to him as quickly and as innocently as when she was a girl. "And what *did* you think, Klarns," she half whispered — "tell me."

He did not speak, but answered her blue eyes and then her lips, as her arms slipped quite naturally around his neck.

. . . . . .

The dawn was breaking as Clarence and Jim Hooker emerged together from the gate of the casa. Mr. Hooker looked sleepy. He had found, after his return from Fair Plains, that his host had an early engage-

ment at Santa Inez, and he had insisted upon rising to see him off. It was with difficulty, indeed, that Clarence could prevent his accompanying him. Clarence had not revealed to Susy the night before the real object of his journey, nor did Hooker evidently suspect it, yet when the former had mounted his horse, he hesitated for an instant, extending his hand.

"If I should happen to be detained," he began with a half smile.

But Jim was struggling with a yawn. "That 's all right — don't mind us," he said, stretching his arms. Clarence's hesitating hand dropped to his side, and with a light reckless laugh and a half sense of providential relief he galloped away.

What happened immediately thereafter during his solitary ride to Santa Inez, looking back upon it in after years, seemed but a confused recollection, more like a dream. The long stretches of vague distance, gradually opening clearer with the rising sun in an unclouded sky; the meeting with a few early or belated travelers and his unconscious avoidance of them, as if they might know of his object; the black shadows of foreshortened cattle rising before him on the

plain and arousing the same uneasy sensation of their being waylaying men; the wondering recognition of houses and landmarks he had long been familiar with; his purposeless attempts to recall the circumstances in which he had known them — all these were like a dream. So, too, were the recollections of the night before, the episode with Susy, already mingled and blended with the memory of their previous past; his futile attempts to look forward to the future, always, however, abandoned with relief at the thought that the next few hours might make them unnecessary. So also was the sudden realization that Santa Inez was before him, when he had thought he was not yet halfway there, and as he dismounted before the Court House his singular feeling — followed, however, by no fear or distress — was that he had come so early to the rendezvous that he was not yet quite prepared for it.

This same sense of unreality pervaded his meeting with the deputy sheriff, at the news that the Federal judge had, as was expected, dismissed the prisoners on their own recognizances, and that Captain Pinckney was at the hotel at breakfast. In the like ab-

stracted manner he replied to the one or two questions of the deputy, exhibited the pistols he had brought with him, and finally accompanied him to a little meadow hidden by trees, below the hotel, where the other principal and his seconds were awaiting them. And here he awoke — clear-eyed, keen, forceful, and intense!

So stimulated were his faculties that his sense of hearing in its acuteness took in every word of the conversation between the seconds, a few paces distant. He heard his adversary's seconds say carelessly to the deputy sheriff, "I presume this is a case where there will be no apology or mediation," and the deputy's reply, "I reckon my man means business, but he seems a little queer." He heard the other second laugh, and say lightly, "They 're apt to be so when it 's their first time out," followed by the more anxious aside of the other second as the deputy turned away, — "Yes, but by G—d I don't like his looks!" His sense of sight was also so acute that having lost the choice of position, when the coin was tossed, and being turned with his face to the sun, even through the glare he saw, with unerring distinctness of outline, the black-coated

figure of his opponent moved into range — saw the perfect outline of his features, and how the easy, supercilious smile, as he threw away his cigar, appeared to drop out of his face with a kind of vacant awe as he faced him. He felt his nerves become as steel as the counting began, and at the word "three," knew he had fired by the recoil of the pistol in his leveled hand, simultaneously with its utterance. And at the same moment, still standing like a rock, he saw his adversary miserably collapse, his legs grotesquely curving inwards under him, — without even the dignity of death in his fall, — and so sink helplessly like a felled bull to the ground. Still erect, and lowering only the muzzle of his pistol, as a thin feather of smoke curled up its shining side, he saw the doctor and seconds run quickly to the heap, try to lift its limp impotence into shape, and let it drop again with the words, "Right through the forehead, by G—d!"

"You 've done for him," said the deputy, turning to Clarence with a singular look of curiosity, "and I reckon you had better get out of this mighty quick. They did n't expect it; they 're just ragin'; they may

round on you — and" — he added, more slowly, "they seem to have just found out who you are."

Even while he was speaking, Clarence, with his quickened ear, heard the words, "One of Hamilton Brant's pups" "Just like his father," from the group around the dead man. He did not hesitate, but walked coolly towards them. Yet a certain fierce pride — which he had never known before — stirred in his veins as their voices hushed and they half recoiled before him.

"Am I to understand from my second, gentlemen," he said, looking round the group, "that you are not satisfied?"

"The fight was square enough," said Pinckney's second in some embarrassment, "but I reckon that he," pointing to the dead man, "did not know who you were."

"Do you mean that he did not know that I was the son of a man proficient in the use of arms?"

"I reckon that 's about it," returned the second, glancing at the others.

"I am glad to say, sir, that I have a better opinion of his courage," said Clarence, lifting his hat to the dead body as he turned away.

Yet he was conscious of no remorse, concern, or even pity in his act. Perhaps this was visible in his face, for the group appeared awed by this perfection of the duelist's coolness, and even returned his formal parting salutation with a vague and timid respect. He thanked the deputy, regained the hotel, saddled his horse and galloped away.

But not towards the Rancho. Now that he could think of his future, that had no place in his reflections; even the episode of Susy was forgotten in the new and strange conception of himself and his irresponsibility which had come upon him with the killing of Pinckney and the words of his second. It was his dead father who had stiffened his arm and directed the fatal shot! It was hereditary influences — which others had been so quick to recognize — that had brought about this completing climax of his trouble. How else could he account for it that he — a conscientious, peaceful, sensitive man, tender and forgiving as he had believed himself to be — could now feel so little sorrow or compunction for his culminating act? He had read of successful duelists who were haunted by remorse

for their first victim; who retained a terrible consciousness of the appearance of the dead man; he had no such feeling; he had only a grim contentment in the wiped-out inefficient life, and contempt for the limp and helpless body. He suddenly recalled his callousness as a boy when face to face with the victims of the Indian massacre, his sense of fastidious superciliousness in the discovery of the body of Susy's mother! — surely it was the cold blood of his father influencing him ever thus. What had he to do with affection, with domestic happiness, with the ordinary ambitions of man's life — whose blood was frozen at its source! Yet even with this very thought came once more the old inconsistent tenderness he had as a boy lavished upon the almost unknown and fugitive father who had forsaken his childish companionship, and remembered him only by secret gifts. He remembered how he had worshiped him even while the pious padres at San José were endeavoring to eliminate this terrible poison from his blood and combat his hereditary instinct in his conflicts with his school-fellows. And it was a part of this inconsistency that, riding away from the scene of his first bloodshed,

his eyes were dimmed with moisture, not for his victim, but for the one being who he believed had impelled him to the act.

This and more was in his mind during his long ride to Fair Plains, his journey by coach to the Embarcadero, his midnight passage across the dark waters of the bay, and his reëntrance to San Francisco, but what should be his future was still unsettled.

As he wound round the crest of Russian Hill and looked down again upon the awakened city, he was startled to see that it was fluttering and streaming with bunting. From every public building and hotel, from the roofs of private houses, and even the windows of lonely dwellings, flapped and waved the striped and starry banner. The steady breath of the sea carried it out from masts and yards of ships at their wharves, from the battlements of the forts Alcatraz and Yerba Bueno. He remembered that the ferryman had told him that the news from Fort Sumter had swept the city with a revulsion of patriotic sentiment, and that there was no doubt that the State was saved to the Union. He looked down upon it

with haggard, bewildered eyes, and then a strange gasp and fullness of the throat! For afar a solitary bugle had blown the "reveille" at Fort Alcatraz.

PART II.

CHAPTER I.

Night at last, and the stir and tumult of a great fight over. Even the excitement that had swept this portion of the battle-field — only a small section of a vaster area of struggle — into which a brigade had marched, held its own, been beaten back, recovered its ground, and pursuing, had passed out of it forever, leaving only its dead behind, and knowing nothing more of that struggle than its own impact and momentum — even this wild excitement had long since evaporated with the stinging smoke of gunpowder, the acrid smell of burning rags from the clothing of a dead soldier fired by a bursting shell, or the heated reek of sweat and leather. A cool breath that seemed to bring back once more the odor of the upturned earthworks along the now dumb line of battle began to move from the suggestive darkness beyond.

But into that awful penetralia of death

and silence there was no invasion — there had been no retreat. A few of the wounded had been brought out, under fire, but the others had been left with the dead for the morning light and succor. For it was known that in that horrible obscurity, riderless horses, frantic with the smell of blood, galloped wildly here and there, or, maddened by wounds, plunged furiously at the intruder ; that the wounded soldier, still armed, could not always distinguish friend from foe or from the ghouls of camp followers who stripped the dead in the darkness and struggled with the dying. A shot or two heard somewhere in that obscurity counted as nothing with the long fusillade that had swept it in the daytime; the passing of a single life, more or less, amounted to little in the long roll-call of the day's slaughter.

But with the first beams of the morning sun — and the slowly moving "relief detail" from the camp — came a weird half-resurrection of that ghastly field. Then it was that the long rays of sunlight, streaming away a mile beyond the battle line, pointed out the first harvest of the dead where the reserves had been posted. There they lay in heaps and piles, killed by solid shot or

bursting shells that had leaped the battle line to plunge into the waiting ranks beyond. As the sun lifted higher its beams fell within the range of musketry fire, where the dead lay thicker, — even as they had fallen when killed outright, — with arms extended and feet at all angles to the field. As it touched these dead upturned faces, strangely enough it brought out no expression of pain or anguish — but rather as if death had arrested them only in surprise and awe. It revealed on the lips of those who had been mortally wounded and had turned upon their side the relief which death had brought their suffering, sometimes shown in a faint smile. Mounting higher, it glanced upon the actual battle line, curiously curving for the shelter of walls, fences, and breastworks, and here the dead lay, even as when they lay and fired, their faces prone in the grass but their muskets still resting across the breastworks. Exposed to grape and canister from the battery on the ridge, death had come to them mercifully also — through the head and throat. And now the whole field lay bare in the sunlight, broken with grotesque shadows cast from sitting, crouching, half-recumbent but always rigid

figures, which might have been effigies on their own monuments. One half-kneeling soldier, with head bowed between his stiffened hands, might have stood for a carven figure of Grief at the feet of his dead comrade. A captain, shot through the brain in the act of mounting a wall, lay sideways half across it, his lips parted with a word of command; his sword still pointing over the barrier the way that they should go.

But it was not until the sun had mounted higher that it struck the central horror of the field and seemed to linger there in dazzling persistence, now and then returning to it in startling flashes that it might be seen of men and those who brought succor. A tiny brook had run obliquely near the battle line. It was here that, the night before the battle, friend and foe had filled their canteens side by side with soldierly recklessness — or perhaps a higher instinct — purposely ignoring each other's presence; it was here that the wounded had afterwards crept, crawled, and dragged themselves; here they had pushed, wrangled, striven, and fought for a draught of that precious fluid which assuaged the thirst of their wounds — or happily put them out of their

misery forever; here overborne, crushed, suffocated by numbers, pouring their own blood into the flood, and tumbling after it with their helpless bodies, they dammed the stream, until recoiling, red and angry, it had burst its banks and overflowed the cotton-field in a broad pool that now sparkled in the sunlight. But below this human dam — a mile away — where the brook still crept sluggishly, the ambulance horses sniffed and started from it.

The detail moved on slowly, doing their work expeditiously, and apparently callously, but really only with that mechanical movement that saves emotion. Only once they were moved to an outbreak of indignation, — the discovery of the body of an officer whose pockets were turned inside out, but whose hand was still tightly grasped on his buttoned waistcoat, as if resisting the outrage that had been done while still in life. As the men disengaged the stiffened hand something slipped from the waistcoat to the ground. The corporal picked it up and handed it to his officer. It was a sealed packet. The officer received it with the carelessness which long experience of these pathetic missives from the dying to their liv-

ing relations had induced, and dropped it in the pocket of his tunic, with the half-dozen others that he had picked up that morning, and moved on with the detail. A little further on they halted, in the attitude of attention, as a mounted officer appeared, riding slowly down the line.

There was something more than the habitual respect of their superior in their faces as he came forward. For it was the general who had commanded the brigade the day before, — the man who had leaped with one bound into the foremost rank of military leaders. It was his invincible spirit that had led the advance, held back defeat against overwhelming numbers, sustained the rally, impressed his subordinate officers with his own undeviating purpose, and even infused them with an almost superstitious belief in his destiny of success. It was this man who had done what it was deemed impossible to do, — what even at the time it was thought unwise and unstrategic to do, — who had held a weak position, of apparently no importance, under the mandate of an incomprehensible order from his superior, which at best asked only for a sacrifice and was rewarded with a victory. He had de-

cimated his brigade, but the wounded and dying had cheered him as he passed, and the survivors had pursued the enemy until the bugle called them back. For such a record he looked still too young and scholarly, albeit his handsome face was dark and energetic, and his manner taciturn.

His quick eye had already caught sight of the rifled body of the officer, and contracted. As the captain of the detail saluted him he said curtly, —

"I thought the orders were to fire upon any one desecrating the dead?"

"They are, General; but the hyenas don't give us a chance. That 's all yonder poor fellow saved from their claws," replied the officer, as he held up the sealed packet. "It has no address."

The general took it, examined the envelope, thrust it into his belt, and said, —

"I will take charge of it."

The sound of horses' hoofs came from the rocky roadside beyond the brook. Both men turned. A number of field officers were approaching.

"The division staff," said the captain, in a lower voice, falling back.

They came slowly forward, a central

figure on a gray horse leading here — as in history. A short, thick-set man with a grizzled beard closely cropped around an inscrutable mouth, and the serious formality of a respectable country deacon in his aspect, which even the major-general's blazon on the shoulder-strap of his loose tunic on his soldierly seat in the saddle could not entirely obliterate. He had evidently perceived the general of brigade, and quickened his horse as the latter drew up. The staff followed more leisurely, but still with some curiosity, to witness the meeting of the first general of the army with the youngest. The division general saluted, but almost instantly withdrew his leathern gauntlet, and offered his bared hand to the brigadier. The words of heroes are scant. The drawn-up detail, the waiting staff listened. This was all they heard: —

"Halleck tells me you 're from California?"

"Yes, General."

"Ah! I lived there, too, in the early days. Wonderful country. Developed greatly since my time, I suppose?"

"Yes, General."

"Great resources; finest wheat-growing

country in the world, sir. You don't happen to know what the actual crop was this year?"

"Hardly, General! but something enormous."

"Yes, I have always said it would be. Have a cigar?"

He handed his cigar-case to the brigadier. Then he took one himself, lighted it at the smouldering end of the one he had taken from his mouth, was about to throw the stump carelessly down, but, suddenly recollecting himself, leaned over his horse, and dropped it carefully a few inches away from the face of a dead soldier. Then, straightening himself in the saddle, he shoved his horse against the brigadier, moving him a little further on, while a slight movement of his hand kept the staff from following.

"A heavy loss here!"

"I 'm afraid so, General."

"It could n't be helped. We had to rush in your brigade to gain time, and occupy the enemy, until we could change front."

The young general looked at the shrewd, cold eyes of his chief.

"Change front?" he echoed.

"Yes. Before a gun was fired, we discovered that the enemy was in complete possession of all our plans, and knew every detail of our forward movement. All had to be changed."

The younger man now instantly understood the incomprehensible order of the day before.

The general of division continued, with his first touch of official formality, —

"You understand, therefore, General Brant, that in the face of this extraordinary treachery, the utmost vigilance is required, and a complete surveillance of your camp followers and civilians, to detect the actual spy within our lines, or the traitor we are harboring, who has become possessed of this information. You will overhaul your brigade, and weed out all suspects, and in the position which you are to take to-morrow, and the plantation you will occupy, you will see that your private quarters, as well as your lines, are cleared of all but those you can vouch for."

He reined in his horse, again extended his hand, saluted, and rejoined his staff.

Brigadier-General Clarence Brant remained for a moment with his head bent in

thoughtful contemplation of the coolness of his veteran chief under this exciting disclosure, and the strategy with which he had frustrated the traitor's success. Then his eye caught the sealed packet in his belt. He mechanically drew it out, and broke the seal. The envelope was filled with papers and memorandums. But as he looked at them his face darkened and his brow knit. He glanced quickly around him. The staff had trotted away; the captain and his detail were continuing their work at a little distance. He took a long breath, for he was holding in his hand a tracing of their camp, even of the position he was to occupy tomorrow, and a detailed account of the movements, plans, and force of the whole division as had been arranged in council of war the day before the battle! But there was no indication of the writer or his intentions.

He thrust the papers hurriedly back into the envelope, but placed it, this time, in his breast. He galloped towards the captain.

"Let me see again the officer from whom you took that packet!"

The captain led him to where the body lay, with others, extended more decently on

the grass awaiting removal. General Brant with difficulty repressed an ejaculation.

"Why, it 's one of our own men," he said quickly.

"Yes, General. They say it 's Lieutenant Wainwright, a regular, of the paymaster-general's department."

"Then what was he doing here?" asked General Brant sternly.

"I can't make out, sir, unless he went into the last advance as a volunteer. Wanted to see the fight, I suppose. He was a dashing fellow, a West Pointer, — and a Southerner, too, — a Virginian."

"A Southerner!" echoed Brant quickly.

"Yes, sir."

"Search him again," said Brant quietly. He had recovered his usual coolness, and as the captain again examined the body, he took out his tablets and wrote a few lines. It was an order to search the quarters of Lieutenant Wainwright and bring all papers, letters, and documents to him. He then beckoned one of the detail towards him. "Take that to the provost marshal at once. Well, Captain," he added calmly, as the officer again approached him, "what do you find?"

"Only this, sir," returned the captain, with a half smile, producing a small photograph, "I suppose it was overlooked, too."

He handed it to Brant.

There was a sudden fixing of his commanding officer's eyes, but his face did not otherwise change.

"It 's the usual find, General. Always a photograph! But this time a handsome woman!"

"Very," said Clarence Brant quietly. It was the portrait of his own wife.

CHAPTER II.

Nevertheless, so complete was his control of voice and manner that, as he rode on to his quarters, no one would have dreamed that General Brant had just looked upon the likeness of the wife from whom he had parted in anger four years ago. Still less would they have suspected the strange fear that came upon him that in some way she was connected with the treachery he had just discovered. He had heard from her only once, and then through her late husband's lawyer, in regard to her Californian property, and believed that she had gone to her relations in Alabama, where she had identified herself with the Southern cause, even to the sacrifice of her private fortune. He had heard her name mentioned in the Southern press as a fascinating society leader, and even coadjutrix of Southern politicians, — but he had no reason to believe that she had taken so active or so desperate a part in the struggle. He tried to

think that his uneasiness sprang from his recollection of the previous treachery of Captain Pinckney, and the part that she had played in the Californian conspiracy, although he had long since acquitted her of the betrayal of any nearer trust. But there was a fateful similarity in the two cases. There was no doubt that this Lieutenant Wainwright was a traitor in the camp, — that he had succumbed to the usual sophistry of his class in regard to his superior allegiance to his native State. But was there the inducement of another emotion, or was the photograph only the souvenir of a fascinating priestess of rebellion, whom the dead man had met? There was perhaps less of feeling than scorn in the first suggestion, but he was nevertheless relieved when the provost marshal found no other incriminating papers in Wainwright's effects. Nor did he reveal to the division general the finding of the photograph. It was sufficient to disclose the work of the traitor without adding what might be a clue to his wife's participation in it, near or remote. There was risk enough in the former course, — which his duty made imperative. He hardly dared to think of the past day's slaughter,

which — there was no doubt now — had been due to the previous work of the spy, and how his brigade had been selected — by the irony of Fate — to suffer for and yet retrieve it. If she had had a hand in this wicked plot, ought he to spare her? Or was his destiny and hers to be thus monstrously linked together?

Luckily, however, the expiation of the chief offender and the timely discovery of his papers enabled the division commander to keep the affair discreetly silent, and to enjoin equal secrecy on the part of Brant. The latter, however, did not relax his vigilance, and after the advance the next day he made a minute inspection of the ground he was to occupy, its approaches and connections with the outlying country, and the rebel lines; increased the stringency of picket and sentry regulations, and exercised a rigid surveillance of non-combatants and civilians within the lines, even to the lowest canteener or camp follower. Then he turned his attention to the house he was to occupy as his headquarters.

It was a fine specimen of the old colonial planter's house, with its broad veranda, its great detached offices and negro quarters,

and had, thus far, escaped the ravages and billeting of the war. It had been occupied by its owner up to a few days before the engagement, and so great had been the confidence of the enemy in their success that it had been used as the Confederate headquarters on the morning of the decisive battle. Jasmine and rose, unstained by the sulphur of gunpowder, twined around its ruined columns and half hid the recessed windows; the careless flower garden was still in its unkempt and unplucked luxuriance; the courtyard before the stables alone showed marks of the late military occupancy, and was pulverized by the uneasy horse-hoofs of the waiting staff. But the mingled impress of barbaric prodigality with patriarchal simplicity was still there in the domestic arrangements of a race who lived on half equal familiarity with strangers and their own servants.

The negro servants still remained, with a certain cat-like fidelity to the place, and adapted themselves to the Northern invaders with a childlike enjoyment of the novelty of change. Brant, nevertheless, looked them over with an experienced eye, and satisfied himself of their trustworthiness; there was the usual number of "boys," gray-haired

and grizzled in body service, and the "mammys" and "aunties" of the kitchen. There were two or three rooms in the wing which still contained private articles, pictures and souvenirs of the family, and a "young lady's" boudoir, which Brant, with characteristic delicacy, kept carefully isolated and intact from his military household, and accessible only to the family servants. The room he had selected for himself was nearest it, — a small, plainly furnished apartment, with an almost conventual simplicity in its cold, white walls and draperies, and the narrow, nun-like bed. It struck him that it might have belonged to some prim elder daughter or maiden aunt, who had acted as housekeeper, as it commanded the wing and servants' offices, with easy access to the central hall.

There followed a week of inactivity in which Brant felt a singular resemblance in this Southern mansion to the old casa at Robles. The afternoon shadows of the deep verandas recalled the old monastic gloom of the Spanish house, which even the presence of a lounging officer or waiting orderly could not entirely dissipate, and the scent of the rose and jasmine from his windows

overcame him with sad memories. He began to chafe under this inaction, and long again for the excitement of the march and bivouac, — in which, for the past four years, he had buried his past.

He was sitting one afternoon alone before his reports and dispatches, when this influence seemed so strong that he half impulsively laid them aside to indulge in a long reverie. He was recalling his last day at Robles, the early morning duel with Pinckney, the return to San Francisco, and the sudden resolution which sent him that day across the continent to offer his services to the Government. He remembered his delay in the Western town, where a volunteer regiment was being recruited, his entrance into it as a private, his rapid selection, through the force of his sheer devotion and intelligent concentration, to the captaincy of his company; his swift promotion on hard-fought fields to the head of the regiment, and the singular success that had followed his resistless energy, which left him no time to think of anything but his duty. The sudden intrusion of his wife upon his career now, even in this accidental and perhaps innocent way, had seriously unsettled him.

The shadows were growing heavier and deeper, it lacked only a few moments of the sunset bugle, when he was recalled to himself by that singular instinctive consciousness, common to humanity, of being intently looked at. He turned quickly, — the door behind him closed softly. He rose and slipped into the hall. The tall figure of a woman was going down the passage. She was erect and graceful; but, as she turned towards the door leading to the offices, he distinctly saw the gaudily turbaned head and black silhouette of a negress. Nevertheless, he halted a moment at the door of the next room.

"See who that woman is who has just passed, Mr. Martin. She does n't seem to belong to the house."

The young officer rose, put on his cap, and departed. In a few moments he returned.

"Was she tall, sir, of a good figure, and very straight?"

"Yes."

"She is a servant of our neighbors, the Manlys, who occasionally visits the servants here. A mulatto, I think."

Brant reflected. Many of the mulattoes and negresses were of good figure, and the

habit of carrying burdens on their heads gave them a singularly erect carriage.

The lieutenant looked at his chief.

"Have you any orders to give concerning her, General?"

"No," said Brant, after a moment's pause, and turned away.

The officer smiled. It seemed a good story to tell at mess of this human weakness of his handsome, reserved, and ascetic-looking leader.

A few mornings afterwards Brant was interrupted over his reports by the almost abrupt entrance of the officer of the day. His face was flushed, and it was evident that only the presence of his superior restrained his excitement. He held a paper in his hand.

"A lady presents this order and pass from Washington, countersigned by the division general."

"A lady?"

"Yes, sir, she is dressed as such. But she has not only declined the most ordinary civilities and courtesies we have offered her, but she has insulted Mr. Martin and myself grossly, and demands to be shown to you — alone."

Brant took the paper. It was a special order from the President, passing Miss Matilda Faulkner through the Federal lines to visit her uncle's home, known as "Gray Oaks," now held and occupied as the headquarters of Brant's Brigade, in order to arrange for the preservation and disposal of certain family effects and private property that still remained there, or to take and carry away such property; and invoking all necessary aid and assistance from the United States forces in such occupancy. It was countersigned by the division commander. It was perfectly regular and of undoubted authenticity. He had heard of passes of this kind, — the terror of the army, — issued in Washington under some strange controlling influence and against military protest; but he did not let his subordinate see the uneasiness with which it filled him.

"Show her in," he said quietly.

But she had already entered, brushing scornfully past the officer, and drawing her skirt aside, as if contaminated: a very pretty Southern girl, scornful and red-lipped, clad in a gray riding-habit, and still carrying her riding-whip clenched ominously in her slim, gauntleted hand!

"You have my permit in your hand," she said brusquely, hardly raising her eyes to Brant. "I suppose it 's all straight enough, — and even if it is n't, I don't reckon to be kept waiting with those hirelings."

" Your ' permit ' is ' straight ' enough, Miss Faulkner," said Brant, slowly reading her name from the document before him. "But, as it does not seem to include permission to insult my officers, you will perhaps allow them first to retire."

He made a sign to the officer, who passed out of the door.

As it closed, he went on, in a gentle but coldly unimpassioned voice, —

"I perceive you are a Southern lady, and therefore I need not remind you that it is not considered good form to treat even the slaves of those one does not like uncivilly, and I must, therefore, ask you to keep your active animosity for myself."

The young girl lifted her eyes. She had evidently not expected to meet a man so young, so handsome, so refined, and so coldly invincible in manner. Still less was she prepared for that kind of antagonism. In keeping up her preconcerted attitude towards the " Northern hireling," she had

been met with official brusqueness, contemptuous silence, or aggrieved indignation, — but nothing so exasperating as this. She even fancied that this elegant but sardonic-looking soldier was mocking her. She bit her red lip, but, with a scornful gesture of her riding-whip, said, —

"I reckon that your knowledge of Southern ladies is, for certain reasons, not very extensive."

"Pardon me; I have had the honor of marrying one."

Apparently more exasperated than before, she turned upon him abruptly.

"You say my pass is all right. Then I presume I may attend to the business that brought me here."

"Certainly; but you will forgive me if I imagined that an expression of contempt for your hosts was a part of it."

He rang a bell on the table. It was responded to by an orderly.

"Send all the household servants here."

The room was presently filled with the dusky faces of the negro retainers. Here and there was the gleaming of white teeth, but a majority of the assembly wore the true negro serious acceptance of the importance

of "an occasion." One or two even affected an official and soldierly bearing. And, as he fully expected, there were several glances of significant recognition of the stranger.

"You will give," said Brant sternly, "every aid and attention to the wants of this young lady, who is here to represent the interests of your old master. As she will be entirely dependent upon you in all things connected with her visit here, see to it that she does not have to complain to me of any inattention, — or be obliged to ask for other assistance."

As Miss Faulkner, albeit a trifle paler in the cheek, but as scornful as ever, was about to follow the servants from the room, Brant stopped her, with a coldly courteous gesture.

"You will understand, therefore, Miss Faulkner, that you have your wish, and that you will not be exposed to any contact with the members of my military family, nor they with you."

"Am I then to be a prisoner in this house — and under a free pass of your — President?" she said indignantly.

"By no means! You are free to come and go, and see whom you please. I have no power to control your actions. But I have the power to control theirs."

She swept furiously from the room.

"That is quite enough to fill her with a desire to flirt with every man here," said Brant to himself, with a faint smile; "but I fancy they have had a taste enough of her quality."

Nevertheless he sat down and wrote a few lines to the division commander, pointing out that he had already placed the owner's private property under strict surveillance, that it was cared for and perfectly preserved by the household servants, and that the pass was evidently obtained as a subterfuge.

To this he received a formal reply, regretting that the authorities at Washington still found it necessary to put this kind of risk and burden on the army in the field, but that the order emanated from the highest authority, and must be strictly obeyed. At the bottom of the page was a characteristic line in pencil in the general's own hand — "Not the kind that is dangerous."

A flush mounted Brant's cheeks, as if it contained not only a hidden, but a personal significance. He had thought of his own wife!

Singularly enough, a day or two later, at dinner, the conversation turned upon the in-

tense sectional feeling of Southern women, probably induced by their late experiences. Brant, at the head of the table, in his habitual abstraction, was scarcely following the somewhat excited diction of Colonel Strangeways, one of his staff.

"No, sir," reiterated that indignant warrior, "take my word for it! A Southern woman is n't to be trusted on this point, whether as a sister, sweetheart, or wife. And when she *is* trusted, she 's bound to get the better of the man in any of those relations!"

The dead silence that followed, the ominous joggle of a glass at the speaker's elbow, the quick, sympathetic glance that Brant instinctively felt was directed at his own face, and the abrupt change of subject, could not but arrest his attention, even if he had overlooked the speech. His face, however, betrayed nothing. It had never, however, occurred to him before that his family affairs might be known — neither had he ever thought of keeping them a secret. It seemed so purely a personal and private misfortune, that he had never dreamed of its having any public interest. And even now he was a little ashamed of what he be-

lieved was his sensitiveness to mere conventional criticism, which, with the instinct of a proud man, he had despised.

He was not far wrong in his sardonic intuition of the effect of his prohibition upon Miss Faulkner's feelings. Certainly that young lady, when not engaged in her mysterious occupation of arranging her uncle's effects, occasionally was seen in the garden, and in the woods beyond. Although her presence was the signal for the "oblique" of any lounging "shoulder strap," or the vacant "front" of a posted sentry, she seemed to regard their occasional proximity with less active disfavor. Once, when she had mounted the wall to gather a magnolia blossom, the chair by which she had ascended rolled over, leaving her on the wall. At a signal from the guard-room, two sappers and miners appeared carrying a scaling-ladder, which they placed silently against the wall, and as silently withdrew. On another occasion, the same spirited young lady, whom Brant was satisfied would have probably imperiled her life under fire in devotion to her cause, was brought ignominiously to bay in the field by that most appalling of domestic animals, the wander-

ing and untrammeled cow! Brant could not help smiling as he heard the quick, harsh call to "Turn out, guard," saw the men march stolidly with fixed bayonets to the vicinity of the affrighted animal, who fled, leaving the fair stranger to walk shamefacedly to the house. He was surprised, however, that she should have halted before his door, and with tremulous indignation, said, —

"I thank you, sir, for your chivalrousness in turning a defenseless woman into ridicule."

"I regret, Miss Faulkner," began Brant gravely, "that you should believe that I am able to control the advances of farmyard cattle as easily as" — But he stopped, as he saw that the angry flash of her blue eyes, as she darted past him, was set in tears. A little remorseful on the following day, he added a word to his ordinary cap-lifting when she went by, but she retained a reproachful silence. Later in the day, he received from her servant a respectful request for an interview, and was relieved to find that she entered his presence with no trace of her former aggression, but rather with the resignation of a deeply injured, yet not entirely unforgiving, woman.

"I thought," she began coldly, "that I ought to inform you that I would probably be able to conclude my business here by the day after to-morrow, and that you would then be relieved of my presence. I am aware — indeed," she added, bitterly, "I could scarcely help perceiving, that it has been an exceedingly irksome one."

"I trust," began Brant coldly, "that no gentleman of my command has" —

"No!"

She interrupted him quickly, with a return of her former manner, and a passionate sweep of the hand.

"Do you suppose for a moment that I am speaking — that I am even thinking — of them? What are they to me?"

"Thank you. I am glad to know that they are nothing; and that I may now trust that you have consulted my wishes, and have reserved your animosity solely for me," returned Brant quietly. "That being so, I see no reason for your hurrying your departure in the least."

She rose instantly.

"I have," she said slowly, controlling herself with a slight effort, "found some one who will take my duty off my hands. She

is a servant of one of your neighbors, — who is an old friend of my uncle's. The woman is familiar with the house, and our private property. I will give her full instructions to act for me, and even an authorization in writing, if you prefer it. She is already in the habit of coming here; but her visits will give you very little trouble. And, as she is a slave, or, as you call it, I believe, a chattel, she will be already quite accustomed to the treatment which her class are in the habit of receiving from Northern hands."

Without waiting to perceive the effect of her Parthian shot, she swept proudly out of the room.

"I wonder what she means," mused Brant, as her quick step died away in the passage. "One thing is certain, — a woman like that is altogether too impulsive for a spy."

Later, in the twilight, he saw her walking in the garden. There was a figure at her side. A little curious, he examined it more closely from his window. It was already familiar to him, — the erect, shapely form of his neighbor's servant. A thoughtful look passed over his face as he muttered, — "So this is to be her deputy."

CHAPTER III.

Called to a general council of officers at divisional headquarters the next day, Brant had little time for further speculation regarding his strange guest, but a remark from the division commander, that he preferred to commit the general plan of a movement then under discussion to their memories rather than to written orders in the ordinary routine, seemed to show that his chief still suspected the existence of a spy. He, therefore, told him of his late interview with Miss Faulkner, and her probable withdrawal in favor of a mulatto neighbor. The division commander received the information with indifference.

"They 're much too clever to employ a hussy like that, who shows her hand at every turn, either as a spy or a messenger of spies,— and the mulattoes are too stupid, to say nothing of their probable fidelity to us. No, General, if we are watched, it is by an eagle, and not a mocking-bird. Miss

Faulkner has nothing worse about her than her tongue; and there is n't the nigger blood in the whole South that would risk a noose for her, or for any of their masters or mistresses!"

It was, therefore, perhaps, with some mitigation of his usual critical severity that he saw her walking before him alone in the lane as he rode home to quarters. She was apparently lost in a half-impatient, half-moody reverie, which even the trotting hoof-beats of his own and his orderly's horse had not disturbed. From time to time she struck the myrtle hedge beside her with the head of a large flower which hung by its stalk from her listless hands, or held it to her face as if to inhale its perfume. Dismissing his orderly by a side path, he rode gently forward, but, to his surprise, without turning, or seeming to be aware of his presence, she quickened her pace, and even appeared to look from side to side for some avenue of escape. If only to mend matters, he was obliged to ride quickly forward to her side, where he threw himself from his horse, flung the reins on his arm, and began to walk beside her. She at first turned a slightly flushed cheek away from him, and

then looked up with a purely simulated start of surprise.

"I am afraid," he said gently, "that I am the first to break my own orders in regard to any intrusion on your privacy. But I wanted to ask you if I could give you any aid whatever in the change you think of making."

He was quite sincere, — had been touched by her manifest disturbance, and, despite his masculine relentlessness of criticism, he had an intuition of feminine suffering that was in itself feminine.

"Meaning, that you are in a hurry to get rid of me," she said curtly, without raising her eyes.

"Meaning that I only wish to expedite a business which I think is unpleasant to you, but which I believe you have undertaken from unselfish devotion."

The scant expression of a reserved nature is sometimes more attractive to women than the most fluent vivacity. Possibly there was also a melancholy grace in this sardonic soldier's manner that affected her, for she looked up, and said impulsively, —

"You think so?"

But he met her eager eyes with some surprise.

"I certainly do," he replied more coldly. "I can imagine your feelings on finding your uncle's home in the possession of your enemies, and your presence under the family roof only a sufferance. I can hardly believe it a pleasure to you, or a task you would have accepted for yourself alone."

"But," she said, turning towards him wickedly, "what if I did it only to excite my revenge; what if I knew it would give me courage to incite my people to carry war into your own homes; to make you of the North feel as I feel, and taste our bitterness?"

"I could easily understand that, too," he returned, with listless coldness, "although I don't admit that revenge is an unmixed pleasure, even to a woman."

"A woman!" she repeated indignantly. "There is no sex in a war like this."

"You are spoiling your flower," he said quietly. "It is very pretty, and a native one, too; not an invader, or even transplanted. May I look at it?"

She hesitated, half recoiling for an instant, and her hand trembled. Then, suddenly and abruptly she said, with a hysteric little laugh, "Take it, then," and almost thrust it in his hand.

It certainly was a pretty flower, not unlike a lily in appearance, with a bell-like cup and long anthers covered with a fine pollen, like red dust. As he lifted it to his face, to inhale its perfume, she uttered a slight cry, and snatched it from his hand.

"There!" she said, with the same nervous laugh. "I knew you would; I ought to have warned you. The pollen comes off so easily, and leaves a stain. And you 've got some on your cheek. Look!" she continued, taking her handkerchief from her pocket and wiping his cheek; "see there!" The delicate cambric showed a blood-red streak.

"It grows in a swamp," she continued, in the same excited strain; "we call it dragon's teeth, — like the kind that was sown in the story, you know. We children used to find it, and then paint our faces and lips with it. We called it our rouge. I was almost tempted to try it again when I found it just now. It took me back so to the old times."

Following her odd manner rather than her words, as she turned her face towards him suddenly, Brant was inclined to think that she had tried it already, so scarlet was

her cheek. But it presently paled again under his cold scrutiny.

"You must miss the old times," he said calmly. "I am afraid you found very little of them left, except in these flowers."

"And hardly these," she said bitterly. "Your troops had found a way through the marsh, and had trampled down the bushes."

Brant's brow clouded. He remembered that the brook, which had run red during the fight, had lost itself in this marsh. It did not increase his liking for this beautiful but blindly vicious animal at his side, and even his momentary pity for her was fading fast. She was incorrigible. They walked on for a few moments in silence.

"You said," she began at last, in a gentler and even hesitating voice, "that your wife was a Southern woman."

He checked an irritated start with difficulty.

"I believe I did," he said coldly, as if he regretted it.

"And of course you taught her *your* gospel, — the gospel according to St. Lincoln. Oh, I know," she went on hurriedly, as if conscious of his irritation and seeking to allay it. "She was a woman and loved you,

and thought with your thoughts and saw only with your eyes. Yes, that 's the way with us, — I suppose we all do it!" she added bitterly.

"She had her own opinions," said Brant briefly, as he recovered himself.

Nevertheless, his manner so decidedly closed all further discussion that there was nothing left for the young girl but silence. But it was broken by her in a few moments in her old contemptuous voice and manner.

"Pray don't trouble yourself to accompany me any further, General Brant. Unless, of course, you are afraid I may come across some of your — your soldiers. I promise you I won't eat them."

"I am afraid you must suffer my company a little longer, Miss Faulkner, on account of those same soldiers," returned Brant gravely. "You may not know that this road, in which I find you, takes you through a cordon of pickets. If you were alone you would be stopped, questioned, and, failing to give the password, you would be detained, sent to the guard-house, and" — he stopped, and fixed his eyes on her keenly as he added, "and searched."

"You would not dare to search a wo-

man!" she said indignantly, although her flush gave way to a slight pallor.

"You said just now that there should be no sex in a war like this," returned Brant carelessly, but without abating his scrutinizing gaze.

"Then it *is* war?" she said quickly, with a white, significant face.

His look of scrutiny turned to one of puzzled wonder. But at the same moment there was the flash of a bayonet in the hedge, a voice called "Halt!" and a soldier stepped into the road.

General Brant advanced, met the salute of the picket with a few formal words, and then turned towards his fair companion, as another soldier and a sergeant joined the group.

"Miss Faulkner is new to the camp, took the wrong turning, and was unwittingly leaving the lines when I joined her." He fixed his eyes intently on her now colorless face, but she did not return his look. "You will show her the shortest way to quarters," he continued, to the sergeant, "and should she at any time again lose her way, you will again conduct her home, — but without detaining or reporting her."

He lifted his cap, remounted his horse, and rode away, as the young girl, with a proud, indifferent step, moved down the road with the sergeant. A mounted officer passed him and saluted, — it was one of his own staff. From some strange instinct, he knew that he had witnessed the scene, and from some equally strange intuition he was annoyed by it. But he continued his way, visiting one or two outposts, and returned by a long detour to his quarters. As he stepped upon the veranda he saw Miss Faulkner at the bottom of the garden talking with some one across the hedge. By the aid of his glass he could recognize the shapely figure of the mulatto woman which he had seen before. But by its aid he also discovered that she was carrying a flower exactly like the one which Miss Faulkner still held in her hand. Had she been with Miss Faulkner in the lane, and if so, why had she disappeared when he came up? Impelled by something stronger than mere curiosity, he walked quickly down the garden, but she evidently had noticed him, for she as quickly disappeared. Not caring to meet Miss Faulkner again, he retraced his steps, resolving that he would, on the first

opportunity, personally examine and interrogate this new visitor. For if she were to take Miss Faulkner's place in a subordinate capacity, this precaution was clearly within his rights.

He reëntered his room and seated himself at his desk before the dispatches, orders, and reports awaiting him. He found himself, however, working half mechanically, and recurring to his late interview with Miss Faulkner in the lane. If she had any inclination to act the spy, or to use her position here as a means of communicating with the enemy's lines, he thought he had thoroughly frightened her. Nevertheless, now, for the first time, he was inclined to accept his chief's opinion of her. She was not only too clumsy and inexperienced, but she totally lacked the self-restraint of a spy. Her nervous agitation in the lane was due to something more disturbing than his mere possible intrusion upon her confidences with the mulatto. The significance of her question, "Then it *is* war?" was at best a threat, and that implied hesitation. He recalled her strange allusion to his wife; was it merely the outcome of his own foolish confession on their first interview, or was it

a concealed ironical taunt? Being satisfied, however, that she was not likely to imperil his public duty in any way, he was angry with himself for speculating further. But, although he still felt towards her the same antagonism she had at first provoked, he was conscious that she was beginning to exercise a strange fascination over him.

Dismissing her at last with an effort, he finished his work and then rose, and unlocking a closet, took out a small dispatch-box, to which he intended to intrust a few more important orders and memoranda. As he opened it with a key on his watch-chain, he was struck with a faint perfume that seemed to come from it, — a perfume that he remembered. Was it the smell of the flower that Miss Faulkner carried, or the scent of the handkerchief with which she had wiped his cheek, or a mingling of both? Or was he under some spell to think of that wretched girl, and her witch-like flower? He leaned over the box and suddenly started. Upon the outer covering of a dispatch was a singular blood-red streak! He examined it closely, — it was the powdery stain of the lily pollen, — exactly as he had seen it on her handkerchief.

There could be no mistake. He passed his finger over the stain; he could still feel the slippery, infinitesimal powder of the pollen. It was not there when he had closed the box that morning; it was impossible that it should be there unless the box had been opened in his absence. He reëxamined the contents of the box; the papers were all there. More than that, they were papers of no importance except to him personally; contained no plans nor key to any military secret; he had been far too wise to intrust any to the accidents of this alien house. The prying intruder, whoever it was, had gained nothing! But there was unmistakably the attempt! And the existence of a would-be spy within the purlieus of the house was equally clear.

He called an officer from the next room.

"Has any one been here since my absence?"

"No, General."

"Has any one passed through the hall?"

He had fully anticipated the answer, as the subaltern replied, "Only the women servants."

He reëntered the room. Closing the door, he again carefully examined the box, his

table, the papers upon it, the chair before it, and even the Chinese matting on the floor, for any further indication of the pollen. It hardly seemed possible that any one could have entered the room with the flower in their hand without scattering some of the tell-tale dust elsewhere; it was too large a flower to be worn on the breast or in the hair. Again, no one would have dared to linger there long enough to have made an examination of the box, with an officer in the next room, and the sergeant passing. The box had been removed, and the examination made elsewhere!

An idea seized him. Miss Faulkner was still absent, the mulatto had apparently gone home. He quickly mounted the staircase, but instead of entering his room, turned suddenly aside into the wing which had been reserved. The first door yielded as he turned its knob gently and entered a room which he at once recognized as the "young lady's boudoir." But the dusty and draped furniture had been rearranged and uncovered, and the apartment bore every sign of present use. Yet, although there was unmistakable evidence of its being used by a person of taste and refinement, he

was surprised to see that the garments hanging in an open press were such as were used by negro servants, and that a gaudy handkerchief such as housemaids used for turbans was lying on the pretty silk coverlet. He did not linger over these details, but cast a rapid glance round the room. Then his eyes became fixed on a fanciful writing-desk, which stood by the window. For, in a handsome vase placed on its level top, and drooping on a portfolio below, hung a cluster of the very flowers that Miss Faulkner had carried!

CHAPTER IV.

It seemed plain to Brant that the dispatch-box had been conveyed here and opened for security on this desk, and in the hurry of examining the papers the flower had been jostled and the fallen grains of pollen overlooked by the spy. There were one or two freckles of red on the desk, which made this accident appear the more probable. But he was equally struck by another circumstance. The desk stood immediately before the window. As he glanced mechanically from it, he was surprised to see that it commanded an extensive view of the slope below the eminence on which the house stood, even beyond his furthest line of pickets. The vase of flowers, each of which was nearly as large as a magnolia blossom, and striking in color, occupied a central position before it, and no doubt could be quite distinctly seen from a distance. From this circumstance he could not resist the strong impression that this fateful and ex-

traordinary blossom, carried by Miss Faulkner and the mulatto, and so strikingly "in evidence" at the window, was in some way a signal. Obeying an impulse which he was conscious had a half superstitious foundation, he carefully lifted the vase from its position before the window, and placed it on a side table. Then he cautiously slipped from the room.

But he could not easily shake off the perplexity which the occurrence had caused, although he was satisfied that it was fraught with no military or strategic danger to his command, and that the unknown spy had obtained no information whatever. Yet he was forced to admit to himself that he was more concerned in his attempts to justify the conduct of Miss Faulkner with this later revelation. It was quite possible that the dispatch-box had been purloined by some one else during her absence from the house, as the presence of the mulatto servant in his room would have been less suspicious than hers. There was really little evidence to connect Miss Faulkner with the actual outrage, — rather might not the real spy have taken advantage of her visit here, to throw suspicion upon her? He remembered her

singular manner, — the strange inconsistency with which she had forced this flower upon him. She would hardly have done so had she been conscious of its having so serious an import. Yet, what was the secret of her manifest agitation? A sudden inspiration flashed across his mind; a smile came upon his lips. She was in love! The enemy's line contained some sighing Strephon of a young subaltern with whom she was in communication, and for whom she had undertaken this quest. The flower was their language of correspondence, no doubt. It explained also the young girl's animosity against the younger officers, — his adversaries; against himself, — their commander. He had previously wondered why, if she were indeed a spy, she had not chosen, upon some equally specious order from Washington, the headquarters of the division commander, whose secrets were more valuable. This was explained by the fact that she was nearer the lines and her lover in her present abode. He had no idea that he was making excuses for her, — he believed himself only just. The recollection of what she had said of the power of love, albeit it had hurt him cruelly at the time, was now clearer to him,

and even seemed to mitigate her offense. She would be here but a day or two longer; he could afford to wait without interrogating her.

But as to the real intruder, spy or thief, — that was another affair, and quickly settled. He gave an order to the officer of the day peremptorily forbidding the entrance of alien servants or slaves within the precincts of the headquarters. Any one thus trespassing was to be brought before him. The officer looked surprised, he even fancied disappointed. The graces of the mulatto woman's figure had evidently not been thrown away upon his subalterns.

An hour or two later, when he was mounting his horse for a round of inspection, he was surprised to see Miss Faulkner, accompanied by the mulatto woman, running hurriedly to the house. He had forgotten his late order until he saw the latter halted by the sentries, but the young girl came flying on, regardless of her companion. Her skirt was held in one hand, her straw hat had fallen back in her flight, and was caught only by a ribbon around her swelling throat, and her loosened hair lay in a black rippled loop on one shoulder. For an instant Brant

thought that she was seeking him in indignation at his order, but a second look at her set face, eager eyes, and parted scarlet lips, showed him that she had not even noticed him in the concentration of her purpose. She swept by him into the hall, he heard the swish of her skirt and rapid feet on the stairs, — she was gone. What had happened, or was this another of her moods?

But he was called to himself by the apparition of a corporal standing before him, with the mulatto woman, — the first capture under his order. She was tall, well-formed, but unmistakably showing the negro type, even in her small features. Her black eyes were excited, but unintelligent; her manner dogged, but with the obstinacy of half-conscious stupidity. Brant felt not only disappointed, but had a singular impression that she was not the same woman that he had first seen. Yet there was the tall, graceful figure, the dark profile, and the turbaned head that he had once followed down the passage by his room.

Her story was as stupidly simple. She had known "Missy" from a chile! She had just traipsed over to see her that afternoon; they were walking together when the sojers

stopped her. She had never been stopped before, even by "the patter rollers."[1] Her old massa (Manly) had gib leaf to go see Miss Tilly, and had n't said nuffin about no "orders."

More annoyed than he cared to confess, Brant briefly dismissed her with a warning. As he cantered down the slope the view of the distant pickets recalled the window in the wing, and he turned in his saddle to look at it. There it was — the largest and most dominant window in that part of the building — and within it, a distinct and vivid object almost filling the opening, was the vase of flowers, which he had a few hours ago removed, *restored to its original position!* He smiled. The hurried entrance and consternation of Miss Faulkner were now fully explained. He had interrupted some impassioned message, perhaps even countermanded some affectionate rendezvous beyond the lines. And it seemed to settle the fact that it was she who had done the signaling! But would not this also make her cognizant of the taking of the dispatch-box? He reflected, however, that the room

[1] *i. e.*, patrols, — a civic home-guard in the South that kept surveillance of slaves.

was apparently occupied by the mulatto woman — he remembered the calico dresses and turban on the bed — and it was possible that Miss Faulkner had only visited it for the purpose of signaling to her lover. Although this circumstance did not tend to make his mind easier, it was, however, presently diverted by a new arrival and a strange recognition.

As he rode through the camp a group of officers congregated before a large mess tent appeared to be highly amused by the conversation — half monologue and half harangue — of a singular-looking individual who stood in the centre. He wore a "slouch" hat, to the band of which he had imparted a military air by the addition of a gold cord, but the brim was caught up at the side in a peculiarly theatrical and highly artificial fashion. A heavy cavalry sabre depended from a broad-buckled belt under his black frock coat, with the addition of two revolvers — minus their holsters — stuck on either side of the buckle, after the style of a stage smuggler. A pair of long enameled leather riding boots, with the tops turned deeply over, as if they had once done duty for the representative of a cavalier,

completed his extraordinary equipment. The group were so absorbed in him that they did not perceive the approach of their chief and his orderly; and Brant, with a sign to the latter, halted only a few paces from this central figure. His speech was a singular mingling of high-flown and exalted epithets, with inexact pronunciation and occasional lapses of Western slang.

"Well, I ain't purtendin' to any stratutegical smartness, and I did n't gradooate at West Point as one of those Apocryphal Engineers; I don't do much talking about 'flank' movements or 'recognizances in force' or 'Ekellon skirmishing,' but when it comes down to square Ingin fightin', I reckon I kin have my say. There are men who don't know the Army Contractor," he added darkly, "who mebbe have heard of 'Red Jim.' I don't mention names, gentlemen, but only the other day a man that you all know says to me, 'If I only knew what you do about scoutin' I would n't be wanting for information as I do.' I ain't goin' to say who it was, or break any confidences between gentlemen by saying how many stars he had on his shoulder strap; but he was a man who knew what he was say-

ing. And I say agin, gentlemen, that the curse of the Northern Army is the want of proper scoutin'. What was it caused Bull's Run? — Want o' scoutin'. What was it rolled up Pope? — Want o' scoutin'. What caused the slaughter at the Wilderness? — Want o' scoutin' — Ingin scoutin'! Why, only the other day, gentlemen, I was approached to know what I 'd take to organize a scoutin' force. And what did I say? — 'No, General; it ain't because I represent one of the largest Army Beef Contracts in this country,' says I. 'It ain't because I belong, so to speak, to the "Sinews of War;" but because I 'd want about ten thousand trained Ingins from the Reservations!' And the regular West Point, high-toned, scientific inkybus that weighs so heavily on our army don't see it — and won't have it! Then Sherman, he sez to me" —

But here a roar of laughter interrupted him, and in the cross fire of sarcastic interrogations that began Brant saw, with relief, a chance of escape. For in the voice, manner, and, above all, the characteristic temperament of the stranger, he had recognized his old playmate and the husband of Susy, — the redoubtable Jim Hooker! There was

no mistaking that gloomy audacity; that mysterious significance; that magnificent lying. But even at that moment Clarence Brant's heart had gone out, with all his old loyalty of feeling, towards his old companion. He knew that a public recognition of him then and there would plunge Hooker into confusion; he felt keenly the ironical plaudits and laughter of his officers over the manifest weakness and vanity of the ex-teamster, ex-rancher, ex-actor, and husband of his old girl sweetheart, and would have spared him the knowledge that he had overheard it. Turning hastily to the orderly, he bade him bring the stranger to his headquarters, and rode away unperceived.

He had heard enough, however, to account for his presence there, and the singular chance that had brought them again together. He was evidently one of those large civil contractors of supplies whom the Government was obliged to employ, who visited the camp half officially, and whom the army alternately depended upon and abused. Brant had dealt with his underlings in the Commissariat, and even now remembered that he had heard he was coming, but had overlooked the significance of his name.

But how he came to leave his theatrical profession, how he had attained a position which implied a command of considerable capital — for many of the contractors had already amassed large fortunes — and what had become of Susy and her ambitions in this radical change of circumstances, were things still to be learned. In his own changed conditions he had seldom thought of her; it was with a strange feeling of irritation and half responsibility that he now recalled their last interview and the emotion to which he had yielded.

He had not long to wait. He had scarcely regained the quarters at his own private office before he heard the step of the orderly upon the veranda and the trailing clank of Hooker's sabre. He did not know, however, that Hooker, without recognizing his name, had received the message as a personal tribute, and had left his sarcastic companions triumphantly, with the air of going to a confidential interview, to which his well-known military criticism had entitled him. It was with a bearing of gloomy importance and his characteristic, sullen, sidelong glance that he entered the apartment and did not look up until Brant had

signaled the orderly to withdraw, and closed the door behind him. And then he recognized his old boyish companion — the preferred favorite of fortune!

For a moment he gasped with astonishment. For a moment gloomy incredulity, suspicion, delight, pride, admiration, even affection, struggled for mastery in his sullen, staring eyes and open, twitching mouth. For here was Clarence Brant, handsomer than ever, more superior than ever, in the majesty of uniform and authority which fitted him — the younger man — by reason of his four years of active service, with the careless ease and bearing of the veteran! Here was the hero whose name was already so famous that the mere coincidence of it with that of the modest civilian he had known would have struck him as preposterous. Yet here he was — supreme and dazzling — surrounded by the pomp and circumstance of war — into whose reserved presence he, Jim Hooker, had been ushered with the formality of challenge, saluting, and presented bayonets!

Luckily, Brant had taken advantage of his first gratified ejaculation to shake him warmly by the hand, and then, with both

hands laid familiarly on his shoulder, force him down into a chair. Luckily, for by that time Jim Hooker had, with characteristic gloominess, found time to taste the pangs of envy — an envy the more keen since, in spite of his success as a peaceful contractor, he had always secretly longed for military display and distinction. He looked at the man who had achieved it, as he firmly believed, by sheer luck and accident, and his eyes darkened. Then, with characteristic weakness and vanity, he began to resist his first impressions of Clarence's superiority, and to air his own importance. He leaned heavily back in the chair in which he had been thus genially forced, drew off his gauntlet and attempted to thrust it through his belt, as he had seen Brant do, but failed on account of his pistols already occupying that position, dropped it, got his sword between his legs in attempting to pick it up, and then leaned back again, with half-closed eyes serenely indifferent of his old companion's smiling face.

"I reckon," he began slowly, with a slightly patronizing air, "that we 'd have met, sooner or later, at Washington, or at Grant's headquarters, for Hooker, Meacham

& Co. go everywhere, and are about as well known as major-generals, to say nothin',” he went on, with a sidelong glance at Brant's shoulder-straps, “of brigadiers; and it 's rather strange — only, of course, you 're kind of fresh in the service — that you ain't heard of me afore.”

“But I 'm very glad to hear of you now, Jim,” said Brant, smiling, “and from your own lips — which I am also delighted to find,” he added mischievously, “are still as frankly communicative on that topic as of old. But I congratulate you, old fellow, on your good fortune. When did you leave the stage?”

Mr. Hooker frowned slightly.

“I never was really on the stage, you know,” he said, waving his hand with assumed negligence. “Only went on to please my wife. Mrs. Hooker would n't act with vulgar professionals, don't you see! I was really manager most of the time, and lessee of the theatre. Went East when the war broke out, to offer my sword and knowledge of Ingin fightin' to Uncle Sam! Drifted into a big pork contract at St. Louis, with Fremont. Been at it ever since. Offered a commission in the reg'lar service lots o' times. Refused.”

"Why?" asked Brant demurely.

"Too much West Point starch around to suit *me*," returned Hooker darkly. "And too many spies!"

"Spies?" echoed Brant abstractedly, with a momentary reminiscence of Miss Faulkner.

"Yes, spies," continued Hooker, with dogged mystery. "One half of Washington is watching t' other half, and, from the President's wife down, most of the women are secesh!"

Brant suddenly fixed his keen eyes on his guest. But the next moment he reflected that this was only Jim Hooker's usual speech, and possessed no ulterior significance. He smiled again, and said, more gently, —

"And how is Mrs. Hooker?"

Mr. Hooker fixed his eyes on the ceiling, rose, and pretended to look out of the window; then, taking his seat again by the table, as if fronting an imaginary audience, and pulling slowly at his gauntlets after the usual theatrical indication of perfect *sang-froid*, said, —

"There ain't any!"

"Good heavens!" said Brant, with gen-

uine emotion. "I beg your pardon. Really, I" —

"Mrs. Hooker and me are divorced," continued Hooker, slightly changing his attitude, and leaning heavily on his sabre, with his eyes still on his fanciful audience. "There was, you understand" — lightly tossing his gauntlet aside — "incompatibility of temper — and —we — parted! Ha!"

He uttered a low, bitter, scornful laugh, which, however, produced the distinct impression in Brant's mind that up to that moment he had never had the slightest feeling in the matter whatever.

"You seemed to be on such good terms with each other!" murmured Brant vaguely.

"Seemed!" said Hooker bitterly, glancing sardonically at an ideal second row in the pit before him, "yes — seemed! There were other differences, social and political. You understand that; you have suffered, too." He reached out his hand and pressed Brant's, in heavy effusiveness. "But," he continued haughtily, lightly tossing his glove again, "we are also men of the world; we let that pass."

And it was possible that he found the strain of his present attitude too great, for he changed to an easier position.

"But," said Brant curiously, "I always thought that Mrs. Hooker was intensely Union and Northern?"

"Put on!" said Hooker, in his natural voice.

"But you remember the incident of the flag?" persisted Brant.

"Mrs. Hooker was always an actress," said Hooker significantly. "But," he added cheerfully, "Mrs. Hooker is now the wife of Senator Boompointer, one of the wealthiest and most powerful Republicans in Washington — carries the patronage of the whole West in his vest pocket."

"Yet, if she is not a Republican, why did she" — began Brant.

" For a purpose," replied Hooker darkly. "But," he added again, with greater cheerfulness, " she belongs to the very *élite* of Washington society. Goes to all the foreign ambassadors' balls, and is a power at the White House. Her picture is in all the first-class illustrated papers."

The singular but unmistakable pride of the man in the importance of the wife from whom he was divorced, and for whom he did not care, would have offended Brant's delicacy, or at least have excited his ridicule,

but for the reason that he was more deeply stung by Hooker's allusion to his own wife and his degrading similitude of their two conditions. But he dismissed the former as part of Hooker's invincible and still boyish extravagance, and the latter as part of his equally characteristic assumption. Perhaps he was conscious, too, notwithstanding the lapse of years and the condonation of separation and forgetfulness, that he deserved little delicacy from the hands of Susy's husband. Nevertheless, he dreaded to hear him speak again of her; and the fear was realized in a question.

"Does she know you are here?"

"Who?" said Brant curtly.

"Your wife. That is — I reckon she 's your wife still, eh?"

"Yes; but I do not know what she knows," returned Brant quietly. He had regained his self-composure.

"Susy,— Mrs. Senator Boompointer, that is," — said Hooker, with an apparent dignity in his late wife's new title, "allowed that she 'd gone abroad on a secret mission from the Southern Confederacy to them crowned heads over there. She was good at ropin' men in, you know. Anyhow, Susy,

afore she was Mrs. Boompointer, was dead set on findin' out where she was, but never could. She seemed to drop out of sight a year ago. Some said one thing, and some said another. But you can bet your bottom dollar that Mrs. Senator Boompointer, who knows how to pull all the wires in Washington, will know, if any one does."

"But is Mrs. Boompointer really disaffected, and a Southern sympathizer?" said Brant, "or is it only caprice or fashion?"

While speaking he had risen, with a half-abstracted face, and had gone to the window, where he stood in a listening attitude. Presently he opened the window, and stepped outside. Hooker wonderingly followed him. One or two officers had already stepped out of their rooms, and were standing upon the veranda; another had halted in the path. Then one quickly reëntered the house, reappeared with his cap and sword in his hand, and ran lightly toward the guard-house. A slight crackling noise seemed to come from beyond the garden wall.

"What 's up?" said Hooker, with staring eyes.

"Picket firing!"

The crackling suddenly became a long rattle. Brant reëntered the room, and picked up his hat.

"You 'll excuse me for a few moments."

A faint sound, soft yet full, and not unlike a bursting bubble, made the house appear to leap elastically, like the rebound of a rubber ball.

"What 's that?" gasped Hooker.

"Cannon, out of range!"

CHAPTER V.

In another instant bugles were ringing through the camp, with the hurrying hoofs of mounted officers and the trampling of forming men. The house itself was almost deserted. Although the single cannon-shot had been enough to show that it was no mere skirmishing of pickets, Brant still did not believe in any serious attack of the enemy. His position, as in the previous engagement, had no strategic importance to them; they were no doubt only making a feint against it to conceal some advance upon the centre of the army two miles away. Satisfied that he was in easy supporting distance of his division commander, he extended his line along the ridge, ready to fall back in that direction, while retarding their advance and masking the position of his own chief. He gave a few orders necessary to the probable abandonment of the house, and then returned to it. Shot and shell were already dropping in the field below. A

thin ridge of blue haze showed the line of skirmish fire. A small conical, white cloud, like a bursting cotton-pod, revealed an open battery in the willow-fringed meadow. Yet the pastoral peacefulness of the house was unchanged. The afternoon sun lay softly on its deep verandas; the *pot pourri* incense of fallen rose-leaves haunted it still.

He entered his room through the French window on the veranda, when the door leading from the passage was suddenly flung open, and Miss Faulkner swept quickly inside, closed the door behind her, and leaned back against it, panting and breathless.

Clarence was startled, and for a moment ashamed. He had suddenly realized that in the excitement he had entirely forgotten her and the dangers to which she might be exposed. She had probably heard the firing, her womanly fears had been awakened; she had come to him for protection. But as he turned towards her with a reassuring smile, he was shocked to see that her agitation and pallor were far beyond any physical cause. She motioned him desperately to shut the window by which he had entered, and said, with white lips, —

"I must speak with you alone!"

"Certainly. But there is no immediate danger to you even here — and I can soon put you beyond the reach of any possible harm."

"Harm — to me! God! if it were only that!"

He stared at her uneasily.

"Listen," she said gaspingly, "listen to me! Then hate, despise me — kill me if you will. For you are betrayed and ruined — cut off and surrounded! It has been helped on by me, but I swear to you the blow did not come from *my* hand. I would have saved you. God only knows how it happened — it was Fate!"

In an instant Brant saw the whole truth instinctively and clearly. But with the revelation came the usual calmness and perfect self-possession which never yet had failed him in any emergency. With the sound of the increasing cannonade and its shifting position made clearer to his ears, the view of his whole threatened position spread out like a map before his eyes, the swift calculation of the time his men could hold the ridge in his mind — even a hurried estimate of the precious moments he could give to the wretched woman before him — he

even then, gravely and gently, led her to a chair and said in a calm voice, —

"That is not enough! Speak slowly, plainly. I must know everything. How and in what way have you betrayed me?"

She looked at him imploringly — reassured, yet awed by his gentleness.

"You won't believe me; you cannot believe me! for I do not even know. I have taken and exchanged letters — whose contents I never saw — between the Confederates and a spy who comes to this house, but who is far away by this time. I did it because I thought you hated and despised me — because I thought it was my duty to help my cause — because you said it was 'war' between us — but I never spied on you. I swear it."

"Then how do you know of this attack?" he said calmly.

She brightened, half timidly, half hopefully.

"There is a window in the wing of this house that overlooks the slope near the Confederate lines. There was a signal placed in it — not by me — but I know it meant that as long as it was there the plot, whatever it was, was not ripe, and that no attack

would be made on you as long as it was visible. That much I know, — that much the spy had to tell me, for we both had to guard that room in turns. I wanted to keep this dreadful thing off — until" — her voice trembled, "until," she added hurriedly, seeing his calm eyes were reading her very soul, "until I went away — and for that purpose I withheld some of the letters that were given me. But this morning, while I was away from the house, I looked back and saw that the signal was no longer there. Some one had changed it. I ran back, but I was too late — God help me! — as you see."

The truth flashed upon Brant. It was his own hand that had precipitated the attack. But a larger truth came to him now, like a dazzling inspiration. If he had thus precipitated the attack before they were ready, there was a chance that it was imperfect, and there was still hope. But there was no trace of this visible in his face as he fixed his eyes calmly on hers, although his pulses were halting in expectancy as he said —

"Then the spy had suspected you, and changed it."

"Oh, no," she said eagerly, "for the spy was with me and was frightened too. We both ran back together — you remember — she was stopped by the patrol!"

She checked herself suddenly, but too late. Her cheeks blazed, her head sank, with the foolish identification of the spy into which her eagerness had betrayed her.

But Brant appeared not to notice it. He was, in fact, puzzling his brain to conceive what information the stupid mulatto woman could have obtained here. His strength, his position was no secret to the enemy — there was nothing to gain from him. She must have been, like the trembling, eager woman before him, a mere tool of others.

"Did this woman live here?" he said.

"No," she said. "She lived with the Manlys, but had friends whom she visited at your general's headquarters."

With difficulty Brant suppressed a start. It was clear to him now. The information had been obtained at the division headquarters, and passed through his camp as being nearest the Confederate lines. But what was the information — and what movement had he precipitated? It was clear that this woman did not know. He looked at

her keenly. A sudden explosion shook the house, — a drift of smoke passed the window, — a shell had burst in the garden.

She had been gazing at him despairingly, wistfully — but did not blanch or start.

An idea took possession of him. He approached her, and took her cold hand. A half-smile parted her pale lips.

"You have courage — you have devotion," he said gravely. "I believe you regret the step you have taken. If you could undo what you have done, even at peril to yourself, dare you do it?"

"Yes," she said breathlessly.

"You are known to the enemy. If I am surrounded, you could pass through their lines unquestioned?"

"Yes," she said eagerly.

"A note from me would pass you again through the pickets of our headquarters. But you would bear a note to the general that no eyes but his must see. It would not implicate you or yours; would only be a word of warning."

"And you," she said quickly, "would be saved! They would come to your assistance! You would not then be taken?"

He smiled gently.

"Perhaps — who knows!"

He sat down and wrote hurriedly.

"This," he said, handing her a slip of paper, "is a pass. You will use it beyond your own lines. This note," he continued, handing her a sealed envelope, "is for the general. No one else must see it or know of it — not even your lover, should you meet him!"

"My lover!" she said indignantly, with a flash of her old savagery; "what do you mean? I have no lover!"

Brant glanced at her flushed face.

"I thought," he said quietly, "that there was some one you cared for in yonder lines — some one you wrote to. It would have been an excuse" —

He stopped, as her face paled again, and her hands dropped heavily at her side.

"Good God! — you thought that, too! You thought that I would sacrifice you for another man!"

"Pardon me," said Brant quickly. "I was foolish. But whether your lover is a man or a cause, you have shown a woman's devotion. And, in repairing your fault, you are showing more than a woman's courage now."

To his surprise, the color had again mounted her pretty cheeks, and even a flash of mischief shone in her blue eyes.

"It would have been an excuse," she murmured, "yes — to save a man, surely!" Then she said quickly, "I will go. At once! I am ready!"

"One moment," he said gravely. "Although this pass and an escort insure your probable safe conduct, this is 'war' and danger! You are still a spy! Are you ready to go?"

"I am," she said proudly, tossing back a braid of her fallen hair. Yet a moment after she hesitated. Then she said, in a lower voice, "Are you ready to forgive?"

"In either case," he said, touched by her manner; "and God speed you!"

He extended his hand, and left a slight pressure on her cold fingers. But they slipped quickly from his grasp, and she turned away with a heightened color.

He stepped to the door. One or two aides-de-camp, withheld by his order against intrusion, were waiting eagerly with reports. The horse of a mounted field officer was pawing the garden turf. The officers stared at the young girl.

"Take Miss Faulkner, with a flag, to some safe point of the enemy's line. She is a non-combatant of their own, and will receive their protection."

He had scarcely exchanged a dozen words with the aids-de-camp before the field officer hurriedly entered. Taking Brant aside, he said quickly, —

"Pardon me, General; but there is a strong feeling among the men that this attack is the result of some information obtained by the enemy. You must know that the woman you have just given a safeguard to is suspected, and the men are indignant."

"The more reason why she should be conveyed beyond any consequences of their folly, Major," said Brant frigidly, "and I look to you for her safe convoy. There is nothing in this attack to show that the enemy has received any information regarding us. But I would suggest that it would be better to see that my orders are carried out regarding the slaves and non-combatants who are passing our lines from divisional headquarters, where valuable information may be obtained, than in the surveillance of a testy and outspoken girl."

An angry flush crossed the major's cheek

as he saluted and fell back, and Brant turned to the aide-de-camp. The news was grave. The column of the enemy was moving against the ridge — it was no longer possible to hold it — and the brigade was cut off from its communication with the divisional headquarters, although as yet no combined movement was made against it. Brant's secret fears that it was an intended impact against the centre were confirmed. Would his communication to the divisional commander pass through the attacking column in time?

Yet one thing puzzled him. The enemy, after forcing his flank, had shown no disposition, even with their overwhelming force, to turn aside and crush him. He could easily have fallen back, when it was possible to hold the ridge no longer, without pursuit. His other flank and rear were not threatened, as they might have been, by the division of so large an attacking column, which was moving steadily on towards the ridge. It was this fact that seemed to show a failure or imperfection in the enemy's plan. It was possible that his precipitation of the attack by the changed signal had been the cause of it. Doubtless some provision had

been made to attack him in flank and rear, but in the unexpected hurry of the onset it had to be abandoned. He could still save himself, as his officers knew; but his conviction that he might yet be able to support his divisional commander by holding his position doggedly, but coolly awaiting his opportunity, was strong. More than that, it was his temperament and instinct.

Harrying them in flank and rear, contesting the ground inch by inch, and holding his own against the artillery sent to dislodge him, or the outriding cavalry that, circling round, swept through his open ranks, he saw his files melt away beside this steady current without flinching.

CHAPTER VI.

YET all along the fateful ridge — now obscured and confused with thin crossing smoke-drifts from file-firing, like partly rubbed-out slate-pencil marks; or else, when cleared of those drifts, presenting only an indistinguishable map of zigzag lines of straggling wagons and horses, unintelligible to any eye but his — the singular magnetism of the chief was felt everywhere: whether it was shown in the quick closing in of resistance to some sharper onset of the enemy or the more dogged stand of inaction under fire, his power was always dominant. A word or two of comprehensive direction sent through an aide-de-camp, or the sudden relief of his dark, watchful, composed face uplifted above a line of bayonets, never failed in their magic. Like all born leaders, he seemed in these emergencies to hold a charmed life — infecting his followers with a like disbelief in death; men dropped to right and left of him with serene assurance

in their ghastly faces or a cry of life and confidence in their last gasp. Stragglers fell in and closed up under his passing glance; a hopeless, inextricable wrangle around an overturned caisson, at a turn of the road, resolved itself into an orderly, quiet, deliberate clearing away of the impediment before the significant waiting of that dark, silent horseman.

Yet under this imperturbable mask he was keenly conscious of everything; in that apparent concentration there was a sharpening of all his senses and his impressibility: he saw the first trace of doubt or alarm in the face of a subaltern to whom he was giving an order; the first touch of sluggishness in a re-forming line; the more significant clumsiness of a living evolution that he knew was clogged by the dead bodies of comrades; the ominous silence of a breastwork; the awful inertia of some rigidly kneeling files beyond, which still kept their form but never would move again; the melting away of skirmish points; the sudden gaps here and there; the sickening incurving of what a moment before had been a straight line — all these he saw in all their fatal significance. But even at this moment, coming

upon a hasty barricade of overset commissary wagons, he stopped to glance at a familiar figure he had seen but an hour ago, who now seemed to be commanding a group of collected stragglers and camp followers. Mounted on a wheel, with a revolver in each hand and a bowie knife between his teeth — theatrical even in his paroxysm of undoubted courage — glared Jim Hooker. And Clarence Brant, with the whole responsibility of the field on his shoulders, even at that desperate moment, found himself recalling a vivid picture of the actor Hooker personating the character of "Red Dick" in "Rosalie, the Prairie Flower," as he had seen him in a California theatre five years before.

It wanted still an hour of the darkness that would probably close the fight of that day. Could he hold out, keeping his offensive position so long? A hasty council with his officers showed him that the weakness of their position had already infected them. They reminded him that his line of retreat was still open — that in the course of the night the enemy, although still pressing towards the division centre, might yet turn and outflank him — or that their strangely delayed supports might come up

before morning. Brant's glass, however, remained fixed on the main column, still pursuing its way along the ridge. It struck him suddenly, however, that the steady current had stopped, spread out along the crest on both sides, and was now at right angles with its previous course. There had been a check! The next moment the thunder of guns along the whole horizon, and the rising cloud of smoke, revealed a line of battle. The division centre was engaged. The opportunity he had longed for had come — the desperate chance to throw himself on their rear and cut his way through to the division — but it had come too late! He looked at his shattered ranks — scarce a regiment remained. Even as a demonstration, the attack would fail against the enemy's superior numbers. Nothing clearly was left to him now but to remain where he was — within supporting distance, and await the issue of the fight beyond. He was putting up his glass, when the dull boom of cannon in the extreme western limit of the horizon attracted his attention. By the still gleaming sky he could see a long gray line stealing up from the valley from the distant rear of the headquarters to join the main

column. They were the missing supports! His heart leaped. He held the key of the mystery now. The one imperfect detail of the enemy's plan was before him. The supports, coming later from the west, had only seen the second signal from the window — when Miss Faulkner had replaced the vase — and had avoided his position. It was impossible to limit the effect of this blunder. If the young girl who had thus saved him had reached the division commander with his message in time, he might be forewarned, and even profit by it. His own position would be less precarious, as the enemy, already engaged in front, would be unable to recover their position in the rear and correct the blunder. The bulk of their column had already streamed past him. If defeated, there was always the danger that it might be rolled back upon him — but he conjectured that the division commander would attempt to prevent the junction of the supports with the main column by breaking between them, crowding them from the ridge, and joining him. As the last stragglers of the rear guard swept by, Brant's bugles were already recalling the skirmishers. He redoubled his pickets, and resolved to wait and watch.

And there was the more painful duty of looking after the wounded and the dead. The larger rooms of the headquarters had already been used as a hospital. Passing from cot to cot, recognizing in the faces now drawn with agony, or staring in vacant unconsciousness, the features that he had seen only a few hours before flushed with enthusiasm and excitement, something of his old doubting, questioning nature returned. Was there no way but this? How far was *he* — moving among them unscathed and uninjured — responsible?

And if not he — who then? His mind went back bitterly to the old days of the conspiracy — to the inception of that struggle which was bearing such ghastly fruit. He thought of his traitorous wife, until he felt his cheeks tingle, and he was fain to avert his eyes from those of his prostrate comrades, in a strange fear that, with the clairvoyance of dying men, they should read his secret.

It was past midnight when, without undressing, he threw himself upon his bed in the little convent-like cell to snatch a few moments of sleep. Its spotless, peaceful walls and draperies affected him strangely, as if he had brought into its immaculate

serenity the sanguine stain of war. He was awakened suddenly from a deep slumber by an indefinite sense of alarm. His first thought was that he had been summoned to repel an attack. He sat up and listened; everything was silent except the measured tread of the sentry on the gravel walk below. But the door was open. He sprang to his feet and slipped into the gallery in time to see the tall figure of a woman glide before the last moonlit window at its farthest end. He could not see her face — but the characteristic turbaned head of the negro race was plainly visible.

He did not care to follow her or even to alarm the guard. If it were the spy or one of her emissaries, she was powerless now to do any harm, and under his late orders and the rigorous vigilance of his sentinels she could not leave the lines — or, indeed, the house. She probably knew this as well as he did; it was, therefore, no doubt only an accidental intrusion of one of the servants. He reëntered the room, and stood for a few moments by the window, looking over the moonlit ridge. The sounds of distant cannon had long since ceased. Wide awake, and refreshed by the keen morning air,

which alone of all created things seemed to have shaken the burden of the dreadful yesterday from its dewy wings, he turned away and lit a candle on the table. As he was rebuckling his sword belt he saw a piece of paper lying on the foot of the bed from which he had just risen. Taking it to the candle, he read in a roughly scrawled hand:

"You are asleep when you should be on the march. You have no time to lose. Before daybreak the supports of the column you have been foolishly resisting will be upon you. — From one who would save *you*, but hates your cause."

A smile of scorn passed his lips. The handwriting was unknown and evidently disguised. The purport of the message had not alarmed him; but suddenly a suspicion flashed upon him — that it came from Miss Faulkner! She had failed in her attempt to pass through the enemy's lines — or she had never tried to. She had deceived him — or had thought better of her chivalrous impulse, and now sought to mitigate her second treachery by this second warning. And he had let her messenger escape him!

He hurriedly descended the stairs. The sound of voices was approaching him. He

halted, and recognized the faces of the brigade surgeon and one of his aides-de-camp.

"We were hesitating whether to disturb you, general, but it may be an affair of some importance. Under your orders a negro woman was just now challenged stealing out of the lines. Attempting to escape, she was chased, there was a struggle and scramble over the wall, and she fell, striking her head. She was brought into the guard-house unconscious."

"Very good. I will see her," said Brant, with a feeling of relief.

"One moment, general. We thought you would perhaps prefer to see her alone," said the surgeon, "for when I endeavored to bring her to, and was sponging her face and head to discover her injuries, her color came off! She was a white woman — stained and disguised as a mulatto."

For an instant Brant's heart sank. It was Miss Faulkner.

"Did you recognize her?" he said, glancing from the one to the other. "Have you seen her here before?"

"No, sir," replied the aide-de-camp. "But she seemed to be quite a superior woman — a lady, I should say."

Brant breathed more freely.

"Where is she now?" he asked.

"In the guardhouse. We thought it better not to bring her into hospital, among the men, until we had your orders."

"You have done well," returned Brant gravely. "And you will keep this to yourselves for the present; but see that she is brought here quietly and with as little publicity as possible. Put her in my room above, which I give up to her and any necessary attendant. But you will look carefully after her, doctor," — he turned to the surgeon, — "and when she recovers consciousness let me know."

He moved away. Although attaching little importance to the mysterious message, whether sent by Miss Faulkner or emanating from the stranger herself, which, he reasoned, was based only upon a knowledge of the original plan of attack, he nevertheless quickly dispatched a small scouting party in the direction from which the attack might come, with orders to fall back and report at once. With a certain half irony of recollection he had selected Jim Hooker to accompany the party as a volunteer. This done, he returned to the gallery. The surgeon met him at the door.

"The indications of concussion are passing away," he said, "but she seems to be suffering from the exhaustion following some great nervous excitement. You may go in — she may rally from it at any moment."

With the artificial step and mysterious hush of the ordinary visitor to a sick bed, Brant entered the room. But some instinct greater than this common expression of humanity held him suddenly in awe. The room seemed no longer his — it had slipped back into that austere conventual privacy which had first impressed him. Yet he hesitated; another strange suggestion — it seemed almost a vague recollection — overcame him like some lingering perfume, far off and pathetic, in its dying familiarity. He turned his eyes almost timidly towards the bed. The coverlet was drawn up near the throat of the figure to replace the striped cotton gown stained with blood and dust, which had been hurriedly torn off and thrown on a chair. The pale face, cleansed of blood and disguising color, the long hair, still damp from the surgeon's sponge, lay rigidly back on the pillow. Suddenly this man of steady nerve uttered a faint cry, and, with a face as white as the upturned

one before him, fell on his knees beside the bed. For the face that lay there was his wife's!

Yes, hers! But the beautiful hair that she had gloried in — the hair that in his youth he had thought had once fallen like a benediction on his shoulder — was streaked with gray along the blue-veined hollows of the temples; the orbits of those clear eyes, beneath their delicately arched brows, were ringed with days of suffering; only the clear-cut profile, even to the delicate imperiousness of lips and nostril, was still there in all its beauty. The coverlet had slipped from her shoulder; its familiar cold contour startled him. He remembered how, in their early married days, he had felt the sanctity of that Diana-like revelation, and the still nymph-like austerity which clung to this strange, childless woman. He even fancied that he breathed again the subtle characteristic perfume of the laces, embroideries, and delicate enwrappings in her chamber at Robles. Perhaps it was the intensity of his gaze — perhaps it was the magnetism of his presence — but her lips parted with a half sigh, half moan. Her head, although her eyes were still closed, turned on the pillow

instinctively towards him. He rose from his knees. Her eyes opened slowly. As the first glare of wonderment cleared from them, they met him — in the old antagonism of spirit. Yet her first gesture was a pathetic feminine movement with both hands to arrange her straggling hair. It brought her white fingers, cleaned of their disguising stains, as a sudden revelation to her of what had happened; she instantly slipped them back under the coverlet again. Brant did not speak, but with folded arms stood gazing upon her. And it was her voice that first broke the silence.

"You have recognized me? Well, I suppose you know all," she said, with a weak half-defiance.

He bowed his head. He felt as yet he could not trust his voice, and envied her her own.

"I may sit up, may n't I?" She managed, by sheer force of will, to struggle to a sitting posture. Then, as the coverlet slipped from the bare shoulder, she said, as she drew it, with a shiver of disgust, around her again, —

"I forgot that you strip women, you Northern soldiers! But I forgot, too," she

added, with a sarcastic smile, "that you are also my husband, and I am in your room."

The contemptuous significance of her speech dispelled the last lingering remnant of Brant's dream. In a voice as dry as her own, he said, —

"I am afraid you will now have to remember only that I am a Northern general, and you a Southern spy."

"So be it," she said gravely. Then impulsively, "But I have not spied on *you*."

Yet, the next moment, she bit her lips as if the expression had unwittingly escaped her; and with a reckless shrug of her shoulders she lay back on her pillow.

"It matters not," said Brant coldly. "You have used this house and those within it to forward your designs. It is not your fault that you found nothing in the dispatch-box you opened."

She stared at him quickly; then shrugged her shoulders again.

"I might have known she was false to me," she said bitterly, "and that you would wheedle her soul away as you have others. Well, she betrayed me! For what?"

A flush passed over Brant's face. But with an effort he contained himself.

"It was the flower that betrayed you! The flower whose red dust fell in the box when you opened it on the desk by the window in yonder room — the flower that stood in the window as a signal — the flower I myself removed, and so spoiled the miserable plot that your friends concocted."

A look of mingled terror and awe came into her face.

"*You* changed the signal!" she repeated dazedly; then, in a lower voice, "that accounts for it all!" But the next moment she turned again fiercely upon him. "And you mean to tell me that she did n't help you — that she did n't sell me — your wife — to you for — for what was it? A look — a kiss!"

"I mean to say that she did not know the signal was changed, and that she herself restored it to its place. It is no fault of hers nor yours that I am not here a prisoner."

She passed her thin hand dazedly across her forehead.

"I see," she muttered. Then again bursting out passionately, she said — "Fool! you never would have been touched! Do you think that Lee would have gone for you, with higher game in your division com-

mander? No! Those supports were a feint to draw him to your assistance while our main column broke his centre. Yes, you may stare at me, Clarence Brant. You are a good lawyer — they say a dashing fighter, too. I never thought you a coward, even in your irresolution; but you are fighting with men drilled in the art of war and strategy when you were a boy outcast on the plains." She stopped, closed her eyes, and then added, wearily — "But that was yesterday — to-day, who knows? All may be changed. The supports may still attack you. That was why I stopped to write you that note an hour ago, when I believed I should be leaving here for ever. Yes, I did it!" she went on, with half-wearied, half-dogged determination. "You may as well know all. I had arranged to fly. Your pickets were to be drawn by friends of mine, who were waiting for me beyond your lines. Well, I lingered here when I saw you arrive — lingered to write you that note. And — I was too late!"

But Brant had been watching her varying expression, her kindling eye, her strange masculine grasp of military knowledge, her soldierly phraseology, all so new to her, that

he scarcely heeded the feminine ending of her speech. It seemed to him no longer the Diana of his youthful fancy, but some Pallas Athene, who now looked up at him from the pillow. He had never before fully believed in her unselfish devotion to the cause until now, when it seemed to have almost unsexed her. In his wildest comprehension of her he had never dreamed her a Joan of Arc, and yet hers was the face which might have confronted him, exalted and inspired, on the battlefield itself. He recalled himself with an effort.

"I thank you for your would-be warning," he said more gently, if not so tenderly, "and God knows I wish your flight had been successful. But even your warning is unnecessary, for the supports had already come up; they had followed the second signal, and diverged to engage our division on the left, leaving me alone. And their ruse of drawing our commander to assist me would not have been successful, as I had suspected it, and sent a message to him that I wanted no help."

It was the truth; it was the sole purport of the note he had sent through Miss Faulkner. He would not have disclosed his sacri-

fice; but so great was the strange domination of this woman still over him, that he felt compelled to assert his superiority. She fixed her eyes upon him.

"And Miss Faulkner took your message?" she said slowly. "Don't deny it! No one else could have passed through our lines; and you gave her a safe conduct through yours. Yes, I might have known it. And this was the creature they sent me for an ally and confidant!"

For an instant Brant felt the sting of this enforced contrast between the two women. But he only said, —

"You forget that I did not know you were the spy, nor do I believe that she suspected you were my wife."

"Why should she?" she said almost fiercely. "I am known among these people only by the name of Benham — my maiden name. Yes! — you can take me out, and shoot me under that name, without disgracing yours. Nobody will know that the Southern spy was the wife of the Northern general! You see, I have thought even of that!"

"And thinking of that," said Brant slowly, "you have put yourself — I will not

say in my power, for you are in the power of any man in this camp who may know you, or even hear you speak. Well, let us understand each other plainly. I do not know how great a sacrifice your devotion to your cause demands of you; I do know what it seems to demand of me. Hear me, then! I will do my best to protect you, and get you safely away from here; but, failing that, I tell you plainly that I shall blow out your brains and my own together."

She knew that he would do it. Yet her eyes suddenly beamed with a new and awakening light; she put back her hair again, and half raised herself upon the pillow, to gaze at his dark, set face.

"And as I shall let no other life but ours be periled in this affair," he went on quietly, "and will accompany you myself in some disguise beyond the lines, we will together take the risks — or the bullets of the sentries that may save us both all further trouble. An hour or two more will settle that. Until then your weak condition will excuse you from any disturbance or intrusion here. The mulatto woman you have sometimes personated may be still in this house; I will appoint her to attend you. I

suppose you can trust her, for you must personate her again, and escape in her clothes, while she takes your place in this room as my prisoner."

"Clarence!"

Her voice had changed suddenly; it was no longer bitter and stridulous, but low and thrilling as he had heard her call to him that night in the patio of Robles. He turned quickly. She was leaning from the bed — her thin, white hands stretched appealingly towards him.

"Let us go together, Clarence," she said eagerly. "Let us leave this horrible place — these wicked, cruel people — forever. Come with me! Come with me to my people — to my own faith — to my own house — which shall be yours! Come with me to defend it with your good sword, Clarence, against those vile invaders with whom you have nothing in common, and who are the dirt under your feet. Yes, yes! I know it! — I have done you wrong — I have lied to you when I spoke against your skill and power. You are a hero — a born leader of men! I know it! Have I not heard it from the men who have fought against you, and yet admired and understood you, ay, better

than your own? — gallant men, Clarence, soldiers bred who did not know what you were to me nor how proud I was of you even while I hated you? Come with me! Think what we would do together — with one faith — one cause — one ambition! Think, Clarence, there is no limit you might not attain! We are no niggards of our rewards and honors — we have no hireling votes to truckle to — we know our friends! Even I — Clarence — I" — there was a strange pathos in the sudden humility that seemed to overcome her — "I have had my reward and known my power. I have been sent abroad, in the confidence of the highest — to the highest. Don't turn from me. I am offering you no bribe, Clarence, only your deserts. Come with me. Leave these curs behind, and live the hero that you are!"

He turned his blazing eyes upon her.

"If you were a man" — he began passionately, then stopped.

"No! I am only a woman and must fight in a woman's way," she interrupted bitterly. "Yes! I intreat, I implore, I wheedle, I flatter, I fawn, I lie! I creep where you stand upright, and pass through doors to which you would not bow. You wear your

blazon of honor on your shoulder; I hide mine in a slave's gown. And yet I have worked and striven and suffered! Listen, Clarence," — her voice again sank to its appealing minor, — "I know what you men call 'honor,' that which makes you cling to a merely spoken word, or an empty oath. Well, let that pass! I am weary; I have done my share of this work, you have done yours. Let us both fly; let us leave the fight to those who shall come after us, and let us go together to some distant land where the sounds of these guns or the blood of our brothers no longer cry out to us for vengeance! There are those living here — I have met them, Clarence," she went on hurriedly, "who think it wrong to lift up fratricidal hands in the struggle, yet who cannot live under the Northern yoke. They are," her voice hesitated, "good men and women — they are respected — they are" —

"Recreants and slaves, before whom you, spy as you are — stand a queen!" broke in Brant, passionately. He stopped and turned towards the window. After a pause he came back again towards the bed — paused again and then said in a lower voice — "Four years ago, Alice, in the *patio* of our

house at Robles, I might have listened to this proposal, and — I tremble to think — I might have accepted it! I loved you; I was as weak, as selfish, as unreflecting, my life was as purposeless — but for you — as the creatures you speak of. But give me now, at least, the credit of a devotion to my cause equal to your own — a credit which I have never denied you! For the night that you left me, I awoke to a sense of my own worthlessness and degradation — perhaps I have even to thank you for that awakening — and I realized the bitter truth. But that night I found my true vocation — my purpose, my manhood" —

A bitter laugh came from the pillow on which she had languidly thrown herself.

"I believe I left you with Mrs. Hooker — spare me the details."

The blood rushed to Brant's face and then receded as suddenly.

"You left me with Captain Pinckney, who had tempted you, and whom I killed!" he said furiously.

They were both staring savagely at each other. Suddenly he said, "Hush!" and sprang towards the door, as the sound of hurried footsteps echoed along the passage.

But he was too late; it was thrown open to the officer of the guard, who appeared, standing on the threshold.

"Two Confederate officers arrested hovering around our pickets. They demand to see you."

Before Brant could interpose, two men in riding cloaks of Confederate gray stepped into the room with a jaunty and self-confident air.

"Not *demand*, general," said the foremost, a tall, distinguished-looking man, lifting his hand with a graceful deprecating air. "In fact, too sorry to bother you with an affair of no importance except to ourselves. A bit of after-dinner bravado brought us in contact with your pickets, and, of course, we had to take the consequences. Served us right, and we were lucky not to have got a bullet through us. Gad! I 'm afraid my men would have been less discreet! I am Colonel Lagrange, of the 5th Tennessee; my young friend here is Captain Faulkner, of the 1st Kentucky. Some excuse for a youngster like him — none for me! I" —

He stopped, for his eyes suddenly fell upon the bed and its occupant. Both he and his companion started. But to the nat-

ural, unaffected dismay of a gentleman who had unwittingly intruded upon a lady's bed-chamber, Brant's quick eye saw a more disastrous concern superadded. Colonel Lagrange was quick to recover himself, as they both removed their caps.

"A thousand pardons," he said, hurriedly stepping backwards to the door. "But I hardly need say to a fellow-officer, general, that we had no idea of making so gross an intrusion! We heard some cock-and-bull story of your being occupied — cross-questioning an escaped or escaping nigger — or we should never have forced ourselves upon you."

Brant glanced quickly at his wife. Her face had apparently become rigid on the entrance of the two men; her eyes were coldly fixed upon the ceiling. He bowed formally, and, with a wave of his hand towards the door, said, —

"I will hear your story below, gentleman."

He followed them from the room, stopped to quietly turn the key in the lock, and then motioned them to precede him down the staircase.

CHAPTER VII.

Not a word was exchanged till they had reached the lower landing and Brant's private room. Dismissing his subaltern and orderly with a sign, Brant turned towards his prisoners. The jaunty ease, but not the self-possession, had gone from Lagrange's face; the eyes of Captain Faulkner were fixed on his older companion with a half-humorous look of perplexity.

"I am afraid I can only repeat, general, that our foolhardy freak has put us in collision with your sentries," said Lagrange, with a slight hauteur, that replaced his former jauntiness; "and we were very properly made prisoners. If you will accept my parole, I have no doubt our commander will proceed to exchange a couplé of gallant fellows of yours, whom I have had the honor of meeting within our own lines, and whom you must miss probably more than I fear our superiors miss us."

"Whatever brought you here, gentle-

men," said Brant drily, "I am glad, for your sakes, that you are in uniform, although it does not, unfortunately, relieve me of an unpleasant duty."

"I don't think I understand you," returned Lagrange, coldly.

"If you had not been in uniform, you would probably have been shot down as spies, without the trouble of capture," said Brant quietly.

"Do you mean to imply, sir" — began Lagrange sternly.

"I mean to say that the existence of a Confederate spy between this camp and the division headquarters is sufficiently well known to us to justify the strongest action."

"And pray, how can that affect us?" said Lagrange haughtily.

"I need not inform so old a soldier as Colonel Lagrange that the aiding, abetting, and even receiving information from a spy or traitor within one's lines is an equally dangerous service."

"Perhaps you would like to satisfy yourself, General," said Colonel Lagrange, with an ironical laugh. "Pray do not hesitate on account of our uniform. Search us if you like."

"Not on entering my lines, Colonel," replied Brant, with quiet significance.

Lagrange's cheek flushed. But he recovered himself quickly, and with a formal bow said, —

"You will, then, perhaps, let us know your pleasure?"

"My *duty*, Colonel, is to keep you both close prisoners here until I have an opportunity to forward you to the division commander, with a report of the circumstances of your arrest. That I propose to do. How soon I may have that opportunity, or if I am ever to have it," continued Brant, fixing his clear eyes significantly on Lagrange, "depends upon the chances of war, which you probably understand as well as I do."

"We should never think of making any calculation on the action of an officer of such infinite resources as General Brant," said Lagrange ironically.

"You will, no doubt, have an opportunity of stating your own case to the division commander," continued Brant, with an unmoved face. "And," he continued, turning for the first time to Captain Faulkner," "when you tell the commander what I believe to be the fact — from your name and

resemblance — that you are a relation of the young lady who for the last three weeks has been an inmate of this house under a pass from Washington, you will, I have no doubt, favorably explain your own propinquity to my lines."

"My sister Tilly!" said the young officer impulsively. "But she is no longer here. She passed through the lines back to Washington yesterday. No," he added, with a light laugh, "I 'm afraid that excuse won't count for to-day."

A sudden frown upon the face of the elder officer, added to the perfect ingenuousness of Faulkner's speech, satisfied Brant that he had not only elicited the truth, but that Miss Faulkner had been successful. But he was sincere in his suggestion that her relationship to the young officer would incline the division commander to look leniently upon his fault, for he was conscious of a singular satisfaction in thus being able to serve her. Of the real object of the two men before him he had no doubt. They were "the friends" of his wife, who were waiting for her outside the lines! Chance alone had saved her from being arrested with them, with the consequent exposure of her treach-

ery before his own men, who, as yet, had no proof of her guilt, nor any suspicion of her actual identity. Meanwhile his own chance of conveying her with safety beyond his lines was not affected by the incident; the prisoners dare not reveal what they knew of her, and it was with a grim triumph that he thought of compassing her escape without their aid. Nothing of this, however, was visible in his face, which the younger man watched with a kind of boyish curiosity, while Colonel Lagrange regarded the ceiling with a politely repressed yawn. "I regret," concluded Brant, as he summoned the officer of the guard, "that I shall have to deprive you of each other's company during the time you are here; but I shall see that you, separately, want for nothing in your confinement."

"If this is with a view to separate interrogatory, general, I can retire now," said Lagrange, rising, with ironical politeness.

"I believe I have all the information I require," returned Brant, with undisturbed composure. Giving the necessary orders to his subaltern, he acknowledged with equal calm the formal salutes of the two prisoners as they were led away, and returned

quickly to his bedroom above. He paused instinctively for a moment before the closed door, and listened. There was no sound from within. He unlocked the door, and opened it.

So quiet was the interior that for an instant, without glancing at the bed, he cast a quick look at the window, which, till then, he had forgotten, and which he remembered gave upon the veranda roof. But it was still closed, and as he approached the bed, he saw his wife still lying there, in the attitude in which he had left her. But her eyes were ringed, and slightly filmed, as if with recent tears.

It was perhaps this circumstance that softened his voice, still harsh with command, as he said, —

"I suppose you knew those two men?"

"Yes."

"And that I have put it out of their power to help you?"

"I do."

There was something so strangely submissive in her voice that he again looked suspiciously at her. But he was shocked to see that she was quite pale now, and that the fire had gone out of her dark eyes.

"Then I may tell you what is my plan to save you. But, first, you must find this mulatto woman who has acted as your double."

"She is here."

"Here?"

"Yes."

"How do you know it?" he asked, in quick suspicion.

"She was not to leave this place until she knew I was safe within our lines. I have some friends who are faithful to me." After a pause she added, "She has been here already."

He looked at her, startled. "Impossible —I"—

"You locked the door. Yes! but she has a second key. And even if she had not, there is another entrance from that closet. You do not know this house: you have been here two weeks; I spent two years of my life, as a girl, in this room."

An indescribable sensation came over him; he remembered how he had felt when he first occupied it; this was followed by a keen sense of shame on reflecting that he had been, ever since, but a helpless puppet in the power of his enemies, and that she could have escaped if she would, even now.

"Perhaps," he said grimly, "you have already arranged your plans?"

She looked at him with a singular reproachfulness even in her submission.

"I have only told her to be ready to change clothes with me and help me color my face and hands at the time appointed. I have left the rest to you."

"Then this is my plan. I have changed only a detail. You and she must both leave this house at the same time, by different exits, but one of them must be private — and unknown to my men. Do you know of such a one?"

"Yes," she said, "in the rear of the negro quarters."

"Good," he replied, "that will be your way out. She will leave here, publicly, through the parade, armed with a pass from me. She will be overhauled and challenged by the first sentry near the guardhouse, below the wall. She will be subjected to some delay and scrutiny, which she will, however, be able to pass better than you would. This will create the momentary diversion that we require. In the mean time, you will have left the house by the rear, and you will then keep in the shadow of the hedge until

you can drop down along the Run, where it empties into the swamp. That," he continued, fixing his keen eyes upon her, "is the one weak point in the position of this place that is neither overlooked nor defended. But perhaps," he added again grimly, "you already know it."

"It is the marsh where the flowers grow, near the path where you met Miss Faulkner. I had crossed the marsh to give her a letter," she said slowly.

A bitter smile came over Brant's face, but passed as quickly.

"Enough," he said quietly, "I will meet you beside the Run, and cross the marsh with you until you are within hailing distance of your lines. I will be in plain clothes, Alice," he went on slowly, "for it will not be the commander of this force who accompanies you, but your husband, and, without disgracing his uniform, he will drop to your level; for the instant he passes his own lines, in disguise, he will become, like you, a spy, and amenable to its penalties."

Her eyes seemed suddenly to leap up to his with that strange look of awakening and enthusiasm which he had noted before. And in its complete prepossession of all her

instincts she rose from the bed, unheeding her bared arms and shoulders and loosened hair, and stood upright before him. For an instant husband and wife regarded each other as unreservedly as in their own chamber at Robles.

"When shall I go?"

He glanced through the window already growing lighter with the coming dawn. The relief would pass in a few moments; the time seemed propitious.

"At once," he said. "I will send Rose to you."

But his wife had already passed into the closet, and was tapping upon some inner door. He heard the sound of hinges turning and the rustling of garments. She reappeared, holding the curtains of the closet together with her hand, and said, —

"Go! When she comes to your office for the pass, you will know that I have gone."

He turned away.

"Stop!" she said faintly.

He turned back. Her expression had again changed. Her face was deadly pale; a strange tremor seemed to have taken possession of her. Her hands dropped from

the curtain. Her beautiful arms moved slightly forward; it seemed to him that she would in the next moment have extended them towards him. But even then she said hurriedly, "Go! Go!" and slipped again behind the curtains.

He quickly descended the stairs as the sound of trampling feet on the road, and the hurried word of command, announced the return of the scouting party. The officer had little report to make beyond the fact that a morning mist, creeping along the valley, prevented any further observation, and bade fair to interrupt their own communications with the camp. Everything was quiet in the west, although the enemy's lines along the ridge seemed to have receded.

Brant had listened impatiently, for a new idea had seized him. Hooker was of the party, and was the one man in whom he could partly confide, and obtain a disguise. He at once made his way to the commissary wagons — one of which he knew Hooker used as a tent. Hastily telling him that he wished to visit the pickets without recognition, he induced him to lend him his slouched hat and frock coat, leaving with him his own

distinguishing tunic, hat, and sword. He resisted the belt and pistols which Hooker would have forced upon him. As he left the wagon he was amusedly conscious that his old companion was characteristically examining the garments he had left behind with mingled admiration and envy. But he did not know, as he slipped out of the camp, that Mr. Hooker was quietly trying them on, before a broken mirror in the wagon-head!

The gray light of that summer morning was already so strong that, to avoid detection, he quickly dropped into the shadow of the gully that sloped towards the Run. The hot mist which the scouts had seen was now lying like a tranquil sea between him and the pickets of the enemy's rear-guard, which it seemed to submerge, and was clinging in moist tenuous swathes — like drawn-out cotton wool — along the ridge, half obliterating its face. From the valley in the rear it was already stealing in a thin white line up the slope like the advance of a ghostly column, with a stealthiness that, in spite of himself, touched him with superstitious significance. A warm perfume, languid and treacherous — as from the swamp magnolia — seemed to

rise from the half-hidden marsh. An ominous silence, that appeared to be a part of this veiling of all things under the clear opal-tinted sky above, was so little like the hush of rest and peace, that he half-yearned for the outburst of musketry and tumult of attack that might dispel it. All that he had ever heard or dreamed of the insidious South, with its languid subtleties of climate and of race, seemed to encompass him here.

But the next moment he saw the figure he was waiting for stealing towards him from the shadow of the gulley beneath the negro quarters.

Even in that uncertain light there was no mistaking the tall figure, the gaudily striped clinging gown and turbaned head. And then a strange revulsion of feeling, quite characteristic of the emotional side of his singular temperament, overcame him. He was taking leave of his wife—the dream of his youth — perhaps forever! It should be no parting in anger as at Robles; it should be with a tenderness that would blot out their past in their separate memories — God knows! it might even be that a parting at that moment was a joining of them in eter-

nity. In his momentary exaltation it even struck him that it was a duty, no less sacred, no less unselfish than the one to which he had devoted his life. The light was growing stronger; he could hear voices in the nearest picket line, and the sound of a cough in the invading mist. He made a hurried sign to the on-coming figure to follow him, ran ahead, and halted at last in the cover of a hackmatack bush. Still gazing forward over the marsh, he stealthily held out his hand behind him as the rustling skirt came nearer. At last his hand was touched — but even at that touch he started and turned quickly.

It was not his wife, but Rose! — her mulatto double! Her face was rigid with fright, her beady eyes staring in their china sockets, her white teeth chattering. Yet she would have spoken.

"Hush!" he said, clutching her hand, in a fierce whisper. "Not a word!"

She was holding something white in her fingers; he snatched it quickly. It was a note from his wife — not in the disguised hand of her first warning, but in one that he remembered as if it were a voice from their past.

"Forgive me for disobeying you to save you from capture, disgrace, or death — which would have come to you where you were going! I have taken Rose's pass. You need not fear that your honor will suffer by it, for if I am stopped I shall confess that I took it from her. Think no more of me, Clarence, but only of yourself. You are in danger."

He crushed the letter in his hand.

"Tell me," he said in a fierce whisper, seizing her arm, "and speak low. When did you leave her?"

"Sho'ly just now!" gasped the frightened woman.

He flung her aside. There might be still time to overtake and save her before she reached the picket lines. He ran up the gully, and out on to the slope towards the first guard-post. But a familiar challenge reached his ear, and his heart stopped beating.

"Who goes there?"

There was a pause, a rattle of arms — voices — another pause — and Brant stood breathlessly listening. Then the voice rose again slowly and clearly: "Pass the mulatto woman!"

Thank God! she was saved! But the thought had scarcely crossed his mind before it seemed to him that a blinding crackle of sparks burst out along the whole slope below the wall, a characteristic yell which he knew too well rang in his ears, and an undulating line of dusty figures came leaping like gray wolves out of the mist upon his pickets. He heard the shouts of his men falling back as they fired; the harsh commands of a few officers hurrying to their posts, and knew that he had been hopelessly surprised and surrounded!

He ran forward among his disorganized men. To his consternation no one seemed to heed him! Then the remembrance of his disguise flashed upon him. But he had only time to throw away his hat and snatch a sword from a falling lieutenant, before a scorching flash seemed to pass before his eyes and burn through his hair, and he dropped like a log beside his subaltern.

. . . . . .

An aching under the bandage around his head where a spent bullet had grazed his scalp, and the sound of impossible voices in his ears were all he knew as he struggled slowly back to consciousness again. Even

then it still seemed a delusion, — for he was lying on a cot in his own hospital, yet with officers of the division staff around him, and the division commander himself standing by his side, and regarding him with an air of grave but not unkindly concern. But the wounded man felt instinctively that it was not the effect of his physical condition, and a sense of shame came suddenly over him, which was not dissipated by his superior's words. For, motioning the others aside, the major-general leaned over his cot, and said, —

"Until a few moments ago, the report was that you had been captured in the first rush of the rear-guard which we were rolling up for your attack, and when you were picked up, just now, in plain clothes on the slope, you were not recognized. The one thing seemed to be as improbable as the other," he added significantly.

The miserable truth flashed across Brant's mind. Hooker must have been captured in his clothes — perhaps in some extravagant sally — and had not been recognized in the confusion by his own officers. Nevertheless, he raised his eyes to his superior.

"You got my note? "

The general's brow darkened.

"Yes," he said slowly, "but finding you thus unprepared — I had been thinking just now that you had been deceived by that woman — or by others — and that it was a clumsy forgery." He stopped, and seeing the hopeless bewilderment in the face of the wounded man, added more kindly: "But we will not talk of that in your present condition. The doctor says a few hours will put you straight again. Get strong, for I want you to lose no time — for your own sake — to report yourself at Washington."

"Report myself — at Washington!" repeated Brant slowly.

"That was last night's order," said the commander, with military curtness. Then he burst out: "I don't understand it, Brant! I believe you have been misunderstood, misrepresented, perhaps maligned — and I shall make it *my* business to see the thing through — but those are the Department orders. And for the present — I am sorry to say you are relieved of your command."

He turned away, and Brant closed his eyes. With them it seemed to him that he closed his career. No one would ever un-

derstand his explanation — even had he been tempted to give one, and he knew he never would. Everything was over now! Even this wretched bullet had not struck him fairly, and culminated his fate as it might! For an instant, he recalled his wife's last offer to fly with him beyond the seas — beyond this cruel injustice — but even as he recalled it, he knew that flight meant the worst of all — a half-confession! But she had escaped! Thank God for that! Again and again in his hopeless perplexity this comfort returned to him, — he had saved her; he had done his duty. And harping upon this in his strange fatalism, it at last seemed to him that this was for what he had lived — for what he had suffered — for what he had fitly ended his career. Perhaps it was left for him now to pass his remaining years in forgotten exile — even as his father had — his father! — his breath came quickly at the thought — God knows! perhaps as wrongfully accused! It may have been a Providence that she had borne him no child, to whom this dreadful heritage could be again transmitted.

There was something of this strange and fateful resignation in his face, a few hours

later, when he was able to be helped again into the saddle. But he could see in the eyes of the few comrades who commiseratingly took leave of him, a vague, half-repressed awe of some indefinite weakness in the man, that mingled with their heartfelt parting with a gallant soldier. Yet even this touched him no longer. He cast a glance at the house and the room where he had parted from her, at the slope from which she had passed — and rode away.

And then, as his figure disappeared down the road, the restrained commentary of wonder, surmise, and criticism broke out: —

"It must have been something mighty bad, for the old man, who swears by him, looked rather troubled. And it was deuced queer, you know, this changing clothes with somebody, just before this surprise!"

"Nonsense! It 's something away back of that! Did n't you hear the old man say that the orders for him to report himself came from Washington *last night?* No!" — the speaker lowered his voice — "Strangeways says that he had regularly sold himself out to one of them d——d secesh woman spies! It 's the old Marc Antony business over again!"

"Now I think of it," said a younger subaltern, "he did seem mightily taken with one of those quadroons or mulattoes he issued orders against. I suppose that was a blind for us! I remember the first day he saw her; he was regularly keen to know all about her."

Major Curtis gave a short laugh.

"That mulatto, Martin, was a white woman, burnt-corked! She was trying to get through the lines last night, and fell off a wall or got a knock on the head from a sentry's carbine. When she was brought in, Doctor Simmons set to washing the blood off her face; the cork came off and the whole thing came out. Brant hushed it up — and the woman, too — in his own quarters! It 's supposed now that she got away somehow in the rush!"

"It goes further back than that, gentlemen," said the adjutant authoritatively. "They say his wife was a howling secessionist, four years ago, in California, was mixed up in a conspiracy, and he had to leave on account of it. Look how thick he and that Miss Faulkner became, before he helped *her* off!"

"That 's your jealousy, Tommy; she

knew he was, by all odds, the biggest man here, and a good deal more, too, and you had no show!"

In the laugh that followed, it would seem that Brant's eulogy had been spoken and forgotten. But as Lieutenant Martin was turning away, a lingering corporal touched his cap.

"You were speaking of those prowling mulattoes, sir. You know the general passed one out this morning."

"So I have heard."

"I reckon she did n't get very far. It was just at the time that we were driven in by their first fire, and I think she got her share of it, too. Do you mind walking this way, sir!"

The lieutenant did not mind, although he rather languidly followed. When they had reached the top of the gully, the corporal pointed to what seemed to be a bit of striped calico hanging on a thorn bush in the ravine.

"That 's her," said the corporal. "I know the dress; I was on guard when she was passed. The searchers, who were picking up our men, have n't got to her yet; but she ain't moved or stirred these two

hours. Would you like to go down and see her?"

The lieutenant hesitated. He was young, and slightly fastidious as to unnecessary unpleasantness. He believed he would wait until the searchers brought her up, when the corporal might call him.

The mist came up gloriously from the swamp like a golden halo. And as Clarence Brant, already forgotten, rode moodily through it towards Washington, hugging to his heart the solitary comfort of his great sacrifice, his wife, Alice Brant, for whom he had made it, was lying in the ravine, dead and uncared for. Perhaps it was part of the inconsistency of her sex that she was pierced with the bullets of those she had loved, and was wearing the garments of the race that she had wronged.

PART III.

CHAPTER I.

It was sunset of a hot day at Washington. Even at that hour the broad avenues, which diverged from the Capitol like the rays of another sun, were fierce and glittering. The sterile distances between glowed more cruelly than ever, and pedestrians, keeping in the scant shade, hesitated on the curbstones before plunging into the Sahara-like waste of crossings. The city seemed deserted. Even that vast army of contractors, speculators, place-hunters, and lobbyists, which hung on the heels of the other army, and had turned this pacific camp of the nation into a battlefield of ignoble conflict and contention — more disastrous than the one to the South — had slunk into their holes in hotel back bedrooms, in shady bar-rooms, or in the negro quarters of Georgetown, as if the majestic, white-robed Goddess enthroned upon the dome of the Capitol had at last descended among them and was

smiting to right and left with the flat and flash of her insufferable sword.

Into this stifling atmosphere of greed and corruption Clarence Brant stepped from the shadow of the War Department. For the last three weeks he had haunted its anterooms and audience-chambers, in the vain hope of righting himself before his superiors, who were content, without formulating charges against him, to keep him in this disgrace of inaction and the anxiety of suspense. Unable to ascertain the details of the accusation, and conscious of his own secret, he was debarred the last resort of demanding a court-martial, which he knew could only exonerate him by the exposure of the guilt of his wife, whom he still hoped had safely escaped. His division commander, in active operations in the field, had no time to help him at Washington. Elbowed aside by greedy contractors, forestalled by selfish politicians, and disdaining the ordinary method of influence, he had no friend to turn to. In his few years of campaigning he had lost his instinct of diplomacy, without acquiring a soldier's bluntness.

The nearly level rays of the sun forced him at last to turn aside into one of the

openings of a large building — a famous caravansary of that hotel-haunted capital, and he presently found himself in the luxurious bar-room, fragrant with mint, and cool with ice-slabs piled symmetrically on its marble counters. A few groups of men were seeking coolness at small tables with glasses before them and palm-leaf fans in their hands, but a larger and noisier assemblage was collected before the bar, where a man, collarless and in his shirt-sleeves, with his back to the counter, was pretentiously addressing them. Brant, who had moodily dropped into a chair in the corner, after ordering a cooling drink as an excuse for his temporary refuge from the stifling street, half-regretted his enforced participation in their conviviality. But a sudden lowering of the speaker's voice into a note of gloomy significance seemed familiar to him. He glanced at him quickly, from the shadow of his corner. He was not mistaken — it was Jim Hooker!

For the first time in his life, Brant wished to evade him. In the days of his own prosperity his heart had always gone out towards this old companion of his boyhood; in his present humiliation his presence jarred upon

him. He would have slipped away, but to do so he would have had to pass before the counter again, and Hooker, with the self-consciousness of a story-teller, had an eye on his audience. Brant, with a palm-leaf fan before his face, was obliged to listen.

"Yes, gentlemen," said Hooker, examining his glass dramatically, "when a man 's been cooped up in a Rebel prison, with a death line before him that he 's obliged to cross every time he wants a square drink, it seems sort of like a dream of his boyhood to be standin' here comf'ble before his liquor, alongside o' white men once more. And when he knows he 's bin put to all that trouble jest to save the reputation of another man, and the secrets of a few high and mighty ones, it 's almost enough to make his liquor go agin him." He stopped theatrically, seemed to choke emotionally over his brandy squash, but with a pause of dramatic determination finally dashed it down. "No, gentlemen," he continued gloomily, "I don't say what I 'm back in Washington *for* — I don't say what I 've been sayin' to myself when I 've bin picking the weevils outer my biscuits in Libby Prison — but ef you don't see some pretty big men in the

War Department obliged to climb down in the next few days, my name ain't Jim Hooker, of Hooker, Meacham & Co., Army Beef Contractors, and the man who saved the fight at Gray Oaks!"

The smile of satisfaction that went around his audience — an audience quick to seize the weakness of any performance — might have startled a vanity less oblivious than Hooker's; but it only aroused Brant's indignation and pity, and made his position still more intolerable. But Hooker, scornfully expectorating a thin stream of tobacco juice against the spittoon, remained for an instant gloomily silent.

"Tell us about the fight again," said a smiling auditor.

Hooker looked around the room with a certain dark suspiciousness, and then, in an affected lower voice, which his theatrical experience made perfectly audible, went on: —

"It ain't much to speak of, and if it was n't for the principle of the thing, I would n't be talking. A man who 's seen Injin fightin' don't go much on this here West Point fightin' by rule-of-three — but that ain't here or there! Well, I 'd bin out a-scoutin' — just to help the boys along, and

I was sittin' in my wagon about daybreak, when along comes a brigadier-general, and he looks into the wagon flap. I oughter to tell you first, gentlemen, that every minit he was expecting an attack — but he did n't let on a hint of it to me. 'How are you, Jim?' said he. 'How are you, general?' said I. 'Would you mind lendin' me your coat and hat?' says he. 'I 've got a little game here with our pickets, and I don't want to be recognized.' 'Anything to oblige, general,' said I, and with that I strips off my coat and hat, and he peels and puts them on. 'Nearly the same figure, Jim,' he says, lookin' at me, 'suppose you try on my things and see.' With that he hands me his coat — full uniform, by G—d! — with the little gold cords and laces and the epaulettes with a star, and I puts it on — quite innocent-like. And then he says, handin' me his sword and belt, 'Same inches round the waist, I reckon,' and I puts that on too. 'You may as well keep 'em on till I come back,' says he, 'for it 's mighty damp and malarious at this time around the swamp.' And with that he lights out. Well, gentlemen, I had n't sat there five minutes before Bang! bang! rattle! rattle!

kershiz! and I hears a yell. I steps out of the wagon; everything 's quite dark, but the rattle goes on. Then along trots an orderly, leadin' a horse. 'Mount, general,' he says, 'we 're attacked — the rear-guard 's on us!' "

He paused, looked round his audience, and then in a lower voice, said darkly, —

"I ain't a fool, an' in that minute a man's brain works at high pressure, and I saw it all! I saw the little game of the brigadier — to skunk away in my clothes and leave me to be captured in his. But I ain't a dog neither, and I mounted that horse, gentlemen, and lit out to where the men were formin'! I didn't dare to speak, lest they should know me, but I waved my sword, and by G—d! they followed me! And the next minit we was in the thick of it. I had my hat as full of holes as that ice strainer; I had a dozen bullets through my coat, the fringe of my epaulettes was shot away, but I kept the boys at their work — and we stopped 'em! Stopped 'em, gentlemen, until we heard the bugles of the rest of our division, that all this time had been rolling that blasted rear-guard over on us! And it saved the fight; but the next minute the

Johnny Rebs made a last dash and cut me off — and there I was — by G—d, a prisoner! Me that had saved the fight!"

A ripple of ironical applause went round as Hooker gloomily drained his glass, and then held up his hand in scornful deprecation.

"I said I was a prisoner, gentlemen," he went on bitterly; "but that ain't all! I asked to see Johnston, told him what I had done, and demanded to be exchanged for a general officer. He said, 'You be d——d.' I then sent word to the division commander-in-chief, and told him how I had saved Gray Oaks when his brigadier ran away, and he said, 'You be d——d.' I 've bin 'You be d——d' from the lowest non-com. to the commander-in-chief, and when I was at last exchanged, I was exchanged, gentlemen, for two mules and a broken wagon. But I 'm here, gentlemen — as I was thar!"

"Why don't you see the President about it?" asked a bystander, in affected commiseration.

Mr. Hooker stared contemptuously at the suggestion, and expectorated his scornful dissent.

"Not much!" he said. "But I 'm going

to see the man that carries him and his Cabinet in his breeches-pocket — Senator Boompointer."

"Boompointer 's a big man," continued his auditor doubtfully. "Do you know him?"

"Know him?" Mr. Hooker laughed a bitter, sardonic laugh. "Well, gentlemen, I ain't the kind o' man to go in for family influence; but," he added, with gloomy elevation, "considering he 's an intimate relation of mine, *by marriage*, I should say I did."

Brant heard no more; the facing around of his old companion towards the bar gave him that opportunity of escaping he had been waiting for. The defection of Hooker and his peculiar inventions were too characteristic of him to excite surprise, and, although they no longer awakened his good-humored tolerance, they were powerless to affect him in his greater trouble. Only one thing he learned — that Hooker knew nothing of his wife being in camp as a spy — the incident would have been too tempting to have escaped his dramatic embellishment. And the allusion to Senator Boompointer, monstrous as it seemed in Hooker's mouth, gave him a grim temptation. He had heard

of Boompointer's wonderful power; he believed that Susy would and could help him — Clarence — whether she did or did not help Hooker. But the next moment he dismissed the idea, with a flushing cheek. How low had he already sunk, even to think of it!

It had been once or twice in his mind to seek the President, and, under a promise of secrecy, reveal a part of his story. He had heard many anecdotes of his goodness of heart and generous tolerance of all things, but with this was joined — so said contemporaneous history — a flippancy of speech and a brutality of directness from which Clarence's sensibility shrank. Would he see anything in his wife but a common spy on his army; would he see anything in him but the weak victim, like many others, of a scheming woman? Stories current in camp and Congress of the way that this grim humorist had, with an apposite anecdote or a rugged illustration, brushed away the most delicate sentiment or the subtlest poetry, even as he had exposed the sham of Puritanic morality or of Epicurean ethics. Brant had even solicited an audience, but had retired awkwardly, and with his confidence

unspoken, before the dark, humorous eyes, that seemed almost too tolerant of his grievance. He had been to levées, and his heart had sunk equally before the vulgar crowd, who seemed to regard this man as their own buffoon, and the pompousness of position, learning and dignity, which he seemed to delight to shake and disturb.

One afternoon, a few days later, in sheer listlessness of purpose, he found himself again at the White House. The President was giving audience to a deputation of fanatics, who, with a pathetic simplicity almost equal to his own pathetic tolerance, were urging upon this ruler of millions the policy of an insignificant score, and Brant listened to his patient, practical response of facts and logic, clothed in simple but sinewy English, up to the inevitable climax of humorous illustration, which the young brigadier could now see was necessary to relieve the grimness of his refusal. For the first time Brant felt the courage to address him, and resolved to wait until the deputation retired. As they left the gallery he lingered in the ante-room for the President to appear. But, as he did not come, afraid of losing his chances, he returned to the gallery.

Alone in his privacy and shadow, the man he had just left was standing by a column, in motionless abstraction, looking over the distant garden. But the kindly, humorous face was almost tragic with an intensity of weariness! Every line of those strong, rustic features was relaxed under a burden which even the long, lank, angular figure — overgrown and unfinished as his own West — seemed to be distorted in its efforts to adjust itself to; while the dark, deep-set eyes were abstracted with the vague prescience of the prophet and the martyr. Shocked at that sudden change, Brant felt his cheek burn with shame. And he was about to break upon that wearied man's unbending; he was about to add his petty burden to the shoulders of this Western Atlas. He drew back silently, and descended the stairs.

But before he had left the house, while mingling with the crowd in one of the larger rooms, he saw the President reappear beside an important, prosperous-looking figure, on whom the kindly giant was now smiling with humorous toleration. He noticed the divided attention of the crowd; the name of Senator Boompointer was upon every lip:

he was nearly face to face with that famous dispenser of place and preferment — this second husband of Susy! An indescribable feeling — half cynical, half fateful — came over him. He would not have been surprised to see Jim Hooker join the throng, which now seemed to him to even dwarf the lonely central figure that had so lately touched him! He wanted to escape it all!

But his fate brought him to the entrance at the same moment that Boompointer was leaving it, and that distinguished man brushed hastily by him as a gorgeous carriage, drawn by two spirited horses, and driven by a resplendent negro coachman, dashed up. It was the Boompointer carriage.

A fashionably-dressed, pretty woman, who, in style, bearing, opulent contentment, and ingenuous self-consciousness, was in perfect keeping with the slight ostentation of the equipage, was its only occupant. As Boompointer stepped into the vehicle, her blue eyes fell for an instant on Brant. A happy, childlike pink flush came into her cheeks, and a violet ray of recognition and mischief darted from her eyes to his. For it was Susy.

CHAPTER II.

When Brant returned to his hotel there was an augmented respect in the voice of the clerk as he handed him a note with the remark that it had been left by Senator Boompointer's coachman. He had no difficulty in recognizing Susy's peculiarly Brobdingnagian school-girl hand.

"Kla'uns, I call it real mean! I believe you just *hoped* I would n't know you. If you 're a bit like your old self you 'll come right off here — this very night! I 've got a big party on — but we can talk somewhere between the acts! Have n't I growed? Tell me! And my! what a gloomy swell the young brigadier is! The carriage will come for you — so you have no excuse."

The effect of this childish note upon Brant was strangely out of proportion to its triviality. But then it was Susy's very triviality — so expressive of her characteristic irresponsibility — which had always affected him at such moments. Again, as at Robles,

he felt it react against his own ethics. Was she not right in her delightful materialism? Was she not happier than if she had been consistently true to Mrs. Peyton, to the convent, to the episode of her theatrical career, to Jim Hooker — even to himself? And did he conscientiously believe that Hooker or himself had suffered from her inconsistency? No! From all that he had heard, she was a suitable helpmate to the senator, in her social attractiveness, her charming ostentations, her engaging vanity that disarmed suspicion, and her lack of responsibility even in her partisanship. Nobody ever dared to hold the senator responsible for her promises, even while enjoying the fellowship of both, and it is said that the worthy man singularly profited by it. Looking upon the invitation as a possible distraction to his gloomy thoughts, Brant resolved to go.

The moon was high as the carriage whirled him out of the still stifling avenues towards the Soldiers' Home — a sylvan suburb frequented by cabinet ministers and the President — where the good Senator had "decreed," like Kubla Khan, "a stately pleasure dome," to entertain his friends and

partisans. As they approached the house, the trembling light like fireflies through the leaves, the warm silence broken only by a military band playing a drowsy waltz on the veranda, and the heavy odors of jessamine in the air, thrilled Brant with a sense of shame as he thought of his old comrades in the field. But this was presently dissipated by the uniforms that met him in the hall, with the presence of some of his distinguished superiors. At the head of the stairs, with a circling background of the shining crosses and ribbons of the diplomatic corps, stood Susy — her bare arms and neck glittering with diamonds, her face radiant with childlike vivacity. A significant pressure of her little glove as he made his bow seemed to be his only welcome, but a moment later she caught his arm. "You 've yet to know *him*," she said in a half whisper; "he thinks a good deal of himself — just like Jim. But he makes others believe it, and that 's where poor Jim slipped up." She paused before the man thus characteristically disposed of, and presented Brant. It was the man he had seen before — material, capable, dogmatic. A glance from his shrewd eyes — accustomed to the

weighing of men's weaknesses and ambitions —and a few hurried phrases, apparently satisfied him that Brant was not just then important or available to him, and the two men, a moment later, drifted easily apart. Brant sauntered listlessly through the crowded rooms, half remorsefully conscious that he had taken some irrevocable step, and none the less assured by the presence of two or three reporters and correspondents who were dogging his steps, or the glance of two or three pretty women whose curiosity had evidently been aroused by the singular abstraction of this handsome, distinguished, but sardonic-looking officer. But the next moment he was genuinely moved.

A tall young woman had just glided into the centre of the room with an indolent yet supple gracefulness that seemed familiar to him. A change in her position suddenly revealed her face. It was Miss Faulkner. Previously he had known her only in the riding habit of Confederate gray which she had at first affected, or in the light muslin morning dress she had worn at Gray Oaks. It seemed to him, to-night, that the studied elegance of her full dress became her still more; that the pretty willfulness of her chin

and shoulders was chastened and modified by the pearls round her fair throat. Suddenly their eyes met; her face paled visibly; he fancied that she almost leaned against her companion for support; then she met his glance again with a face into which the color had as suddenly rushed, but with eyes that seemed to be appealing to him even to the point of pain and fright. Brant was not conceited; he could see that the girl's agitation was not the effect of any mere personal influence in his recognition, but of something else. He turned hastily away; when he looked around again she was gone.

Nevertheless he felt filled with a vague irritation. Did she think him such a fool as to imperil her safety by openly recognizing her without her consent? Did she think that he would dare to presume upon the service she had done him? Or, more outrageous thought, had she heard of his disgrace, known its cause, and feared that he would drag her into a disclosure to save himself? No, no; she could not think that! She had perhaps regretted what she had done in a freak of girlish chivalry; she had returned to her old feelings and partisanship; she was only startled at meeting the

single witness of her folly. Well, she need not fear! He would as studiously avoid her hereafter, and she should know it. And yet — yes, there was a "yet." For he could not forget — indeed, in the past three weeks it had been more often before him than he cared to think — that she was the one human being who had been capable of a great act of self-sacrifice for him — her enemy, her accuser, the man who had scarcely treated her civilly. He was ashamed to remember now that this thought had occurred to him at the bedside of his wife — at the hour of her escape — even on the fatal slope on which he had been struck down. And now this fond illusion must go with the rest — the girl who had served him so loyally was ashamed of it! A bitter smile crossed his face.

"Well, I don't wonder! Here are all the women asking me who is that good-looking Mephistopheles, with the burning eyes, who is prowling around my rooms as if searching for a victim. Why, you 're smiling for all the world like poor Jim when he used to do the Red Avenger."

Susy's voice — and illustration — recalled him to himself.

"Furious I may be," he said with a gentler smile, although his eyes still glittered, "furious that I have to wait until the one woman I came to see — the one woman I have not seen for so long, while these puppets have been nightly dancing before her — can give me a few moments from them, to talk of the old days."

In his reaction he was quite sincere, although he felt a slight sense of remorse as he saw the quick, faint color rise, as in those old days, even through the to-night's powder of her cheek.

"That 's like the old Kla'uns," she said, with a slight pressure of his arm, "but we will not have a chance to speak until later. When they are nearly all gone, you 'll take me to get a little refreshment, and we 'll have a chat in the conservatory. But you must drop that awfully wicked look and make yourself generally agreeable to those women until then."

It was, perhaps, part of this reaction which enabled him to obey his hostess' commands with a certain recklessness that, however, seemed to be in keeping with the previous Satanic reputation he had all unconsciously achieved. The women listened to the cyni-

cal flippancy of this good-looking soldier with an undisguised admiration which in turn excited curiosity and envy from his own sex. He saw the whispered questioning, the lifted eyebrows, scornful shrugging of shoulders — and knew that the story of his disgrace was in the air. But I fear this only excited him to further recklessness and triumph. Once he thought he recognized Miss Faulkner's figure at a distance, and even fancied that she had been watching him; but he only redoubled his attentions to the fair woman beside him, and looked no more.

Yet he was glad when the guests began to drop off, the great rooms thinned, and Susy, appearing on the arm of her husband, coquettishly reminded him of his promise.

"For I want to talk to you of old times. General Brant," she went on, turning explanatorily to Boompointer, "married my adopted mother in California — at Robles, a dear old place where I spent my earliest years. So, you see, we are sort of relations by marriage," she added, with delightful naïveté.

Hooker's own vainglorious allusion to his relations to the man before him flashed

across Brant's mind, but it left now only a smile on his lips. He felt he had already become a part of the irresponsible comedy played around him. Why should he resist, or examine its ethics too closely? He offered his arm to Susy as they descended the stairs, but, instead of pausing in the supper-room, she simply passed through it with a significant pressure on his arm, and, drawing aside a muslin curtain, stepped into the moonlit conservatory. Behind the curtain there was a small rustic settee; without releasing his arm she sat down, so that when he dropped beside her, their hands met, and mutually clasped.

"Now, Kla'uns," she said, with a slight, comfortable shiver as she nestled beside him, "it 's a little like your chair down at old Robles, is n't it? — tell me! And to think it 's five years ago! But, Kla'uns, what 's the matter? You are changed," she said, looking at his dark face in the moonlight, "or you have something to tell me."

"I have."

"And it 's something dreadful, I know!" she said, wrinkling her brows with a pretty terror. "Could n't you pretend you had

told it to me, and let us go on just the same? Could n't you, Kla'uns? Tell me!"

"I am afraid I could n't," he said, with a sad smile.

"Is it about yourself, Kla'uns? You know," she went on with cheerful rapidity, "I know everything about you — I always did, you know — and I don't care, and never did care, and it don't, and never did, make the slightest difference to me. So don't tell it, and waste time, Kla'uns."

"It 's not about me, but about my wife!" he said slowly.

Her expression changed slightly.

"Oh, her!" she said after a pause. Then, half-resignedly, "Go on, Kla'uns."

He began. He had a dozen times rehearsed to himself his miserable story, always feeling it keenly, and even fearing that he might be carried away by emotion or morbid sentiment in telling it to another. But, to his astonishment, he found himself telling it practically, calmly, almost cynically, to his old playmate, repressing the half devotion and even tenderness that had governed him, from the time that his wife, disguised as the mulatto woman, had secretly watched him at his office, to the hour

that he had passed through the lines. He withheld only the incident of Miss Faulkner's complicity and sacrifice.

"And she got away, after having kicked you out of your place, Kla'uns?" said Susy, when he had ended.

Clarence stiffened beside her. But he felt he had gone too far to quarrel with his confidante.

"She went away. I honestly believe we shall never meet again, or I should not be telling you this!"

"Kla'uns," she said lightly, taking his hand again, "don't you believe it! She won't let you go. You 're one of those men that a woman, when she 's once hooked on to, won't let go of, even when she believes she no longer loves him, or meets bigger and better men. I reckon it 's because you 're so different from other men; maybe there are so many different things about you to hook on to, and you don't slip off as easily as the others. Now, if you were like old Peyton, her first husband, or like poor Jim, or even my Boompointer, you 'd be all right! No, my boy, all we can do is to try to keep her from getting at you here. I reckon she won't trust herself in Washington again in a hurry."

"But I cannot stay here; my career is in the field."

"Your career is alongside o' me, honey — and Boompointer. But nearer *me*. We 'll fix all that. I heard something about your being in disgrace, but the story was that you were sweet on some secesh girl down there, and neglected your business, Kla'uns. But, Lordy! to think it was only your own wife! Never mind; we 'll straighten that out. We 've had worse jobs than that on. Why, there was that commissary who was buying up dead horses at one end of the field, and selling them to the Government for mess beef at the other; and there was that general who would n't make an attack when it rained; and the other general — you know who I mean, Kla'uns — who would n't invade the State where his sister lived; but we straightened them out, somehow, and they were a heap worse than you. We 'll get you a position in the war department here, one of the bureau offices, where you keep your rank and your uniform — you don't look bad in it, Kla'uns — on better pay. And you 'll come and see me, and we 'll talk over old times."

Brant felt his heart turn sick within him.

But he was at her mercy now! He said, with an effort, —

"But I 've told you that my career — nay, my *life* — now is in the field."

"Don't you be a fool, Kla'uns, and leave it there! You have done your work of fighting — mighty good fighting, too, — and everybody knows it. You 've earned a change. Let others take your place."

He shuddered, as he remembered that his wife had made the same appeal. Was he a fool then, and these two women — so totally unlike in everything — right in this?

"Come, Kla'uns," said Susy, relapsing again against his shoulder. "Now talk to me! You don't say what you think of me, of my home, of my furniture, of my position — even of him! Tell me!"

"I find you well, prosperous, and happy," he said, with a faint smile.

"Is that all? And how do I look?"

She turned her still youthful, mischievous face towards him in the moonlight. The witchery of her blue eyes was still there as of old, the same frank irresponsibility beamed from them; her parted lips seemed to give him back the breath of his youth. He started, but she did not.

"Susy, dear!"

It was her husband's voice.

"I quite forgot," the Senator went on, as he drew the curtain aside, "that you are engaged with a friend; but Miss Faulkner is waiting to say good-night, and I volunteered to find you."

"Tell her to wait a moment," said Susy, with an impatience that was as undisguised as it was without embarrassment or confusion.

But Miss Faulkner, unconsciously following Mr. Boompointer, was already upon them. For a moment the whole four were silent, although perfectly composed. Senator Boompointer, unconscious of any infelicity in his interruption, was calmly waiting. Clarence, opposed suddenly to the young girl whom he believed was avoiding his recognition, rose, coldly imperturbable. Miss Faulkner, looking taller and more erect in the long folds of her satin cloak, neither paled nor blushed, as she regarded Susy and Brant with a smile of well-bred apology.

"I expect to leave Washington to-morrow, and may not be able to call again," she said, "or I would not have so particularly pressed a leave-taking upon you."

"I was talking with my old friend, General Brant," said Susy, more by way of introduction than apology.

Brant bowed. For an instant the clear eyes of Miss Faulkner slipped icily across his as she made him an old-fashioned Southern courtesy, and, taking Susy's arm, she left the room. Brant did not linger, but took leave of his host almost in the same breath. At the front door a well-appointed carriage of one of the Legations had just rolled into waiting. He looked back; he saw Miss Faulkner, erect and looking like a bride in her gauzy draperies, descending the stairs before the waiting servants. He felt his heart beat strangely. He hesitated, recalled himself with an effort, hurriedly stepped from the porch into the path, as he heard the carriage door close behind him in the distance, and then felt the dust from her horse's hoofs rise around him as she drove past him and away.

CHAPTER III.

Although Brant was convinced as soon as he left the house that he could not accept anything from the Boompointer influence, and that his interview with Susy was fruitless, he knew that he must temporize. While he did not believe that his old playmate would willingly betray him, he was uneasy when he thought of the vanity and impulsiveness which might compromise him — or of a possible jealousy that might seek revenge. Yet he had no reason to believe that Susy's nature was jealous, or that she was likely to have any cause; but the fact remained that Miss Faulkner's innocent intrusion upon their tête-à-tête affected him more strongly than anything else in his interview with Susy. Once out of the atmosphere of that house, it struck him, too, that Miss Faulkner was almost as much of an alien in it as himself. He wondered what she had been doing there. Could it be possible that she was obtaining information for

the South? But he rejected the idea as quickly as it had occurred to him. Perhaps there could be no stronger proof of the unconscious influence the young girl already had over him.

He remembered the liveries of the diplomatic carriage that had borne her away, and ascertained without difficulty that her sister had married one of the foreign ministers, and that she was a guest in his house. But he was the more astonished to hear that she and her sister were considered to be Southern Unionists — and were greatly petted in governmental circles for their sacrificing fidelity to the flag. His informant, an official in the State Department, added that Miss Matilda might have been a good deal of a madcap at the outbreak of the war — for the sisters had a brother in the Confederate service — but that she had changed greatly, and, indeed, within a month. "For," he added, "she was at the White House for the first time last week, and they say the President talked more to her than to any other woman."

The indescribable sensation with which this simple information filled Brant startled him more than the news itself. Hope, joy,

fear, distrust, and despair, alternately distracted him. He recalled Miss Faulkner's almost agonizing glance of appeal to him in the drawing-room at Susy's, and it seemed to be equally consistent with the truth of what he had just heard — or some monstrous treachery and deceit of which she might be capable. Even now she might be a secret emissary of some spy within the President's family; she might have been in correspondence with some traitor in the Boompointer clique, and her imploring glance only the result of a fear of exposure. Or, again, she might have truly recanted after her escapade at Gray Oaks, and feared only his recollection of her as go-between of spies. And yet both of these presumptions were inconsistent with her conduct in the conservatory. It seemed impossible that this impulsive woman, capable of doing what he had himself known her to do, and equally sensitive to the shame or joy of such impulses, should be the same conventional woman of society who had so coldly recognized and parted from him.

But this interval of doubt was transitory. The next day he received a dispatch from the War Department, ordering him to re-

port himself for duty at once. With a beating heart he hurried to the Secretary. But that official had merely left a memorandum with his assistant directing General Brant to accompany some fresh levies to a camp of "organization" near the front. Brant felt a chill of disappointment. Duties of this kind had been left to dubious regular army veterans, hurriedly displaced general officers, and favored detrimentals. But if it was not restoration, it was no longer inaction, and it was at least a release from Washington.

It was also evidently the result of some influence — but hardly that of the Boom-pointers, for he knew that Susy wished to keep him at the Capital. Was there another power at work to send him away from Washington? His previous doubts returned. Nor were they dissipated when the chief of the bureau placed a letter before him with the remark that it had been entrusted to him by a lady with the request that it should be delivered only into his own hands.

"She did not know your hotel address, but ascertained you were to call here. She said it was of some importance. There is

no mystery about it, General," continued the official with a mischievous glance at Brant's handsome, perplexed face, "although it 's from a very pretty woman — whom we all know."

"Mrs. Boompointer?" suggested Brant, with affected lightness.

It was a maladroit speech. The official's face darkened.

"We have not yet become a Postal Department for the Boompointers, General," he said dryly, "however great their influence elsewhere. It was from rather a different style of woman — Miss Faulkner. You will receive your papers later at your hotel, and leave to-night."

Brant's unlucky slip was still potent enough to divert the official attention, or he would have noticed the change in his visitor's face, and the abruptness of his departure.

Once in the street, Brant tore off the envelope. But beneath it was another, on which was written in a delicate, refined hand: "Please do not open this until you reach your destination."

Then she knew he was going! And perhaps this was her influence? All his suspicions again returned. She knew he was

going near the lines, and his very appointment, through her power, might be a plot to serve her and the enemy! Was this letter, which she was entrusting to him, the cover of some missive to her Southern friends which she expected him to carry — perhaps as a return for her own act of self-sacrifice? Was this the appeal she had been making to his chivalry, his gratitude, his honor? The perspiration stood in beads on his forehead. What defect lay hidden in his nature that seemed to make him an easy victim of these intriguing women? He had not even the excuse of gallantry; less susceptible to the potencies of the sex than most men, he was still compelled to bear that reputation. He remembered his coldness to Miss Faulkner in the first days of their meeting, and her effect upon his subalterns. Why had she selected him from among them — when she could have modeled the others like wax to her purposes? Why? And yet with the question came a possible answer that he hardly dared to think of — that in its very vagueness seemed to fill him with a stimulating thrill and hopefulness. He quickened his pace. He would take the letter, and yet be master of himself when the time came to open it.

That time came three days later, in his tent at Three Pines Crossing. As he broke open the envelope, he was relieved to find that it contained no other inclosure, and seemed intended only for himself. It began abruptly: —

"When you read this, you will understand why I did not speak to you when we met last night; why I even dreaded that you might speak to me, knowing, as I did, what I ought to tell you at that place and moment — something you could only know from me. I did not know you were in Washington, although I knew you were relieved; I had no way of seeing you or sending to you before, and I only came to Mrs. Boompointer's party in the hope of hearing news of you.

"You know that my brother was captured by your pickets in company with another officer. He thinks you suspected the truth — that he and his friend were hovering near your lines to effect the escape of the spy. But he says that, although they failed to help her, she did escape, or was passed through the lines by your connivance. He says that you seemed to know her, that from what Rose — the mulatto woman — told him,

you and she were evidently old friends. I would not speak of this, nor intrude upon your private affairs, only that I think you ought to know that *I* had no knowledge of it when I was in your house, but believed her to be a stranger to you. You gave me no intimation that you knew her, and I believed that you were frank with me. But I should not speak of this at all — for I believe that it would have made no difference to me in repairing the wrong that I thought I had done you — only that, as I am forced by circumstances to tell you the terrible ending of this story, you ought to know it all.

"My brother wrote to me that the evening after you left, the burying party picked up the body of what they believed to be a mulatto woman lying on the slope. It was not Rose, but the body of the very woman — the real and only spy — whom you had passed through the lines. She was accidentally killed by the Confederates in the first attack upon you, at daybreak. But only my brother and his friend recognized her through her blackened face and disguise, and on the plea that she was a servant of one of their friends, they got permission from the division commander to take her

away, and she was buried by her friends and among her people in the little cemetery of Three Pines Crossing, not far from where you have gone. My brother thought that I ought to tell you this: it seems that he and his friend had a strange sympathy for you in what they appear to know or guess of your relations with that woman, and I think he was touched by what he thought was your kindness and chivalry to him on account of his sister. But I do not think he ever knew, or will know, how great is the task that he has imposed upon me.

"You know now, do you not, *why* I did not speak to you when we first met; it seemed so impossible to do it in an atmosphere and a festivity that was so incongruous with the dreadful message I was charged with. And when I had to meet you later — perhaps I may have wronged you — but it seemed to me that you were so preoccupied and interested with other things that I might perhaps only be wearying you with something you cared little for, or perhaps already knew and had quickly forgotten.

"I had been wanting to say something else to you when I had got rid of my dreadful message. I do not know if you still care

to hear it. But you were once generous enough to think that I had done you a service in bringing a letter to your commander. Although I know better than anybody else the genuine devotion to your duty that made you accept my poor service, from all that I can hear, you have never had the credit of it. Will you not try me again? I am more in favor here, and I might yet be more successful in showing your superiors how true you have been to your trust, even if you have little faith in your friend, Matilda Faulkner."

For a long time he remained motionless, with the letter in his hand. Then he arose, ordered his horse, and galloped away.

There was little difficulty in finding the cemetery of Three Pines Crossing — a hillside slope, hearsed with pine and cypress, and starred with white crosses, that in the distance looked like flowers. Still less was there in finding the newer marble shaft among the older lichen-spotted slabs, which bore the simple words: "Alice Benham, Martyr." A few Confederate soldiers, under still plainer and newer wooden headstones, carved only with initials, lay at her feet. Brant sank on his knees beside the

grave, but he was shocked to see that the base of the marble was stained with the red pollen of the fateful lily, whose blossoms had been heaped upon her mound, but whose fallen petals lay dark and sodden in decay.

How long he remained there he did not know. And then a solitary bugle from the camp seemed to summon him, as it had once before summoned him, and he went away — as he had gone before — to a separation that he now knew was for all time.

Then followed a month of superintendence and drill, and the infusing into the little camp under his instruction the spirit which seemed to be passing out of his own life forever. Shut in by alien hills on the borderland of the great struggle, from time to time reports reached him of the bitter fighting, and almost disastrous successes of his old division commander. Orders came from Washington to hurry the preparation of his raw levies to the field, and a faint hope sprang up in his mind. But following it came another dispatch ordering his return to the Capital.

He reached it with neither hope nor fear — so benumbed had become his spirit under

this last trial, and what seemed to be now the mockery of this last sacrifice to his wife. Though it was no longer a question of her life and safety, he knew that he could still preserve her memory from stain by keeping her secret, even though its divulgings might clear his own. For that reason, he had even hesitated to inform Susy of her death, in the fear that, in her thoughtless irresponsibility and impulsiveness, she might be tempted to use it in his favor. He had made his late appointment a plea for her withholding any present efforts to assist him. He even avoided the Boompointers' house, in what he believed was partly a duty to the memory of his wife. But he saw no inconsistency in occasionally extending his lonely walks to the vicinity of a foreign Legation, or in being lifted with a certain expectation at the sight of its liveries on the Avenue. There was a craving for sympathy in his heart, which Miss Faulkner's letter had awakened.

Meantime, he had reported himself for duty at the War Department — with little hope, however, in that formality. But he was surprised the next day when the chief of the bureau informed him that his claim was before the President.

"I was not aware that I had presented any claim," he said, a little haughtily.

The bureau chief looked up with some surprise. This quiet, patient, reserved man had puzzled him once or twice before.

"Perhaps I should say 'case,' General," he said, drily. "But the personal interest of the highest executive in the land strikes me as being desirable in anything."

"I only mean that I have obeyed the orders of the department in reporting myself here, as I have done," said Brant, with less feeling, but none the less firmness; "and I should imagine it was not the duty of a soldier to question them. Which I fancy a 'claim' or a 'case' would imply."

He had no idea of taking this attitude before, but the disappointments of the past month, added to this first official notice of his disgrace, had brought forward that dogged, reckless, yet half-scornful obstinacy that was part of his nature.

The official smiled.

"I suppose, then, you are waiting to hear from the President," he said drily.

"I am awaiting orders from the department," returned Brant quietly, "but whether they originate in the President as

commander-in-chief, or not — it is not for me to inquire."

Even when he reached his hotel this half-savage indifference which had taken the place of his former incertitude had not changed. It seemed to him that he had reached the crisis of his life where he was no longer a free agent, and could wait, superior alike to effort or expectation. And it was with a merely dispassionate curiosity that he found a note the next morning from the President's private secretary, informing him that the President would see him early that day.

A few hours later he was ushered through the public rooms of the White House to a more secluded part of the household. The messenger stopped before a modest door and knocked. It was opened by a tall figure — the President himself. He reached out a long arm to Brant, who stood hesitatingly on the threshold, grasped his hand, and led him into the room. It had a single, large, elaborately draped window and a handsome medallioned carpet, which contrasted with the otherwise almost appalling simplicity of the furniture. A single plain angular desk, with a blotting pad and a few sheets of large

foolscap upon it, a waste-paper basket and four plain armchairs, completed the interior with a contrast as simple and homely as its long-limbed, black-coated occupant. Releasing the hand of the general to shut a door which opened into another apartment, the President shoved an armchair towards him and sank somewhat wearily into another before the desk. But only for a moment; the long shambling limbs did not seem to adjust themselves easily to the chair; the high narrow shoulders drooped to find a more comfortable lounging attitude, shifted from side to side, and the long legs moved dispersedly. Yet the face that was turned towards Brant was humorous and tranquil.

"I was told I should have to send for you if I wished to see you," he said smilingly.

Already mollified, and perhaps again falling under the previous influence of this singular man, Brant began somewhat hesitatingly to explain.

But the President checked him gently, —

"You don't understand. It was something new to my experience here to find an able-bodied American citizen with an honest genuine grievance who had to have it drawn from him like a decayed tooth. But you

have been here before. I seem to remember your face."

Brant's reserve had gone. He admitted that he had twice sought an audience — but —

"You dodged the dentist! That was wrong." As Brant made a slight movement of deprecation the President continued: "I understand! Not from fear of giving pain to yourself but to others. I don't know that *that* is right, either. A certain amount of pain must be suffered in this world — even by one's enemies. Well, I have looked into your case, General Brant." He took up a piece of paper from his desk, scrawled with two or three notes in pencil. "I think this is the way it stands. You were commanding a position at Gray Oaks when information was received by the department that, either through neglect or complicity, spies were passing through your lines. There was no attempt to prove your neglect; your orders, the facts of your personal care and precaution, were all before the department. But it was also shown that your wife, from whom you were only temporarily separated, was a notorious secessionist; that, before the war, you yourself

were suspected, and that, therefore, you were quite capable of evading your own orders, which you may have only given as a blind. On this information you were relieved by the department of your command. Later on it was discovered that the spy was none other than your own wife, disguised as a mulatto; that, after her arrest by your own soldiers, you connived at her escape — and this was considered conclusive proof of — well, let us say — your treachery."

"But I did not know it was my wife until she was arrested," said Brant impulsvely.

The President knitted his eyebrows humorously.

"Don't let us travel out of the record, General. "You 're as bad as the department. The question was one of your personal treachery, but you need not accept the fact that you were justly removed because your wife was a spy. Now, General, I am an old lawyer, and I don't mind telling you that in Illinois we would n't hang a yellow dog on that evidence before the department. But when I was asked to look into the matter by your friends, I discovered something of more importance to you. I had been trying to find a scrap of evidence

that would justify the presumption that you had sent information to the enemy. I found that it was based upon the fact of the enemy being in possession of knowledge at the first battle at Gray Oaks, which could only have been obtained from our side, and which led to a Federal disaster; that you, however, retrieved by your gallantry. I then asked the secretary if he was prepared to show that you had sent the information with that view, or that you had been overtaken by a tardy sense of repentance. He preferred to consider my suggestion as humorous. But the inquiry led to my further discovery that the only treasonable correspondence actually in evidence was found upon the body of a trusted Federal officer, and had been forwarded to the division commander. But there was no record of it in the case."

"Why, I forwarded it myself," said Brant eagerly.

"So the division commander writes," said the President, smiling, "and he forwarded it to the department. But it was suppressed in some way. Have you any enemies, General Brant?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then you probably have. You are

young and successful. Think of the hundred other officers who naturally believe themselves better than you are, and have n't a traitorous wife. Still, the department may have made an example of you for the benefit of the only man who could n't profit by it."

"Might it not have been, sir, that this suppression was for the good report of the service — as the chief offender was dead?"

"I am glad to hear you say so, General, for it is the argument I have used successfully in behalf of your wife."

"Then you know it all, sir?" said Brant after a gloomy pause.

"All, I think. Come, General, you seemed just now to be uncertain about your enemies. Let me assure you, you need not be so in regard to your friends.

"I dare to hope I have found one, sir," said Brant with almost boyish timidity.

"Oh, not me!" said the President, with a laugh of deprecation. "Some one much more potent."

"May I know his name, Mr. President?"

"No, for it is a woman. You were nearly ruined by one, General. I suppose it 's quite right that you should be saved by one. And, of course, irregularly."

"A woman!" echoed Brant.

"Yes; one who was willing to confess herself a worse spy than your wife — a double traitor — to save you! Upon my word, General, I don't know if the department was far wrong; a man with such an alternately unsettling and convincing effect upon a woman's highest political convictions should be under some restraint. Luckily the department knows nothing of it."

"Nor would any one else have known from me," said Brant eagerly. "I trust that she did not think — that you, sir, did not for an instant believe that I" —

"Oh dear, no! Nobody would have believed you! It was her free confidence to me. That was what made the affair so difficult to handle. For even her bringing your dispatch to the division commander looked bad for you; and you know he even doubted its authenticity."

"Does she — does Miss Faulkner know the spy was my wife?" hesitated Brant.

The President twisted himself in his chair, so as to regard Brant more gravely with his deep-set eyes, and then thoughtfully rubbed his leg.

"Don't let us travel out of the record,

General," he said after a pause. But as the color surged into Brant's cheek he raised his eyes to the ceiling, and said, in half-humorous recollection,—

"No, I think *that* fact was first gathered from your other friend — Mr. Hooker."

"Hooker!" said Brant, indignantly; "did he come here?"

"Pray don't destroy my faith in Mr. Hooker, General," said the President, in half-weary, half-humorous deprecation. "Don't tell me that any of his inventions are *true!* Leave me at least that magnificent liar — the one perfectly intelligible witness you have. For from the time that he first appeared here with a grievance and a claim for a commission, he has been an unspeakable joy to me and a convincing testimony to you. Other witnesses have been partisans and prejudiced; Mr. Hooker was frankly true to himself. How else should I have known of the care you took to disguise yourself, save the honor of your uniform, and run the risk of being shot as an unknown spy at your wife's side, except from his magnificent version of *his* part in it? How else should I have known the story of your discovery of the Californian

conspiracy, except from his supreme portrayal of it, with himself as the hero? No, you must not forget to thank Mr. Hooker when you meet him. Miss Faulkner is at present more accessible; she is calling on some members of my family in the next room. Shall I leave you with her?"

Brant rose with a pale face and a quickly throbbing heart as the President, glancing at the clock, untwisted himself from the chair, and shook himself out full length, and rose gradually to his feet.

"Your wish for active service is granted, General Brant," he said slowly, "and you will at once rejoin your old division commander, who is now at the head of the Tenth Army Corps. But," he said, after a deliberate pause, "there are certain rules and regulations of your service that even *I* cannot, with decent respect to your department, override. You will, therefore, understand that you cannot rejoin the army in your former position."

The slight flush that came to Brant's cheek quickly passed. And there was only the unmistakable sparkle of renewed youth in his frank eyes as he said —

"Let me go to the front again, Mr. President, and I care not *how*."

The President smiled, and, laying his heavy hand on Brant's shoulder, pushed him gently towards the door of the inner room.

"I was only about to say," he added, as he opened the door, "that it would be necessary for you to rejoin your promoted commander as a major-general. And," he continued, lifting his voice, as he gently pushed his guest into the room, "he has n't even thanked me for it, Miss Faulkner!"

The door closed behind him, and he stood for a moment dazed, and still hearing the distant voice of the President, in the room he had just quitted, now welcoming a new visitor. But the room before him, opening into a conservatory, was empty, save for a single figure that turned, half timidly, half mischievously, towards him. The same quick, sympathetic glance was in both their faces; the same timid, happy look in both their eyes. He moved quickly to her side.

"Then you knew that — that — woman was my wife?" he said, hurriedly, as he grasped her hand.

She cast a half-appealing look at his face — a half-frightened one around the room and at the open door beyond.

"Let us," she said faintly, "go into the conservatory.

. . . . . .

It is but a few years ago that the veracious chronicler of these pages moved with a wondering crowd of sightseers in the gardens of the White House. The war cloud had long since lifted and vanished; the Potomac flowed peacefully by and on to where once lay the broad plantation of a great Confederate leader — now a national cemetery that had gathered the soldier dead of both sections side by side in equal rest and honor — and the great goddess once more looked down serenely from the dome of the white Capitol. The chronicler's attention was attracted by an erect, handsome soldierly-looking man, with a beard and moustache slightly streaked with gray, pointing out the various objects of interest to a boy of twelve or fourteen at his side.

"Yes; although, as I told you, this house belongs only to the President of the United States and his family," said the gentleman, smilingly, "in that little conservatory I proposed to your mother."

"Oh! Clarence, how can you!" said the lady, reprovingly, "you know it was *long* after that!"

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